

Lesson 18

Business and Culture

1.1. Warm-up Questions

1. Why is it important to learn about another culture before you visit the country?
2. Have you ever been offended by someone from another culture? What happened?
3. In your country, how do you greet someone you have never met? Handshake? Bow? Kiss on the cheek?

18.2. Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow.

An American salesman went to Japan to meet with some new clients. He went to dinner with several sales representatives from the company including the president. During dinner, one of the sales reps told the American a story about a new idea he had and how he wanted to incorporate it into the business. The American was very interested and spoke at length to the man about his idea. He also praised and encouraged him on his ingenuity.

After dinner, one of the other sales reps gave the American a ride back to his hotel. He told the American that he had been very rude at the dinner. The American was confused; he thought he had been very polite. The sales rep explained that Japanese people are more concerned with the success of the group. In this respect, everyone works together and the praise or encouragement should be given to the group, not an individual. In addition, the American had spent more time talking to the sales rep instead of the president of the company. Any praise should have been directed at the president and his company, not one of the sales reps.

1. What does this story indicate about Americans?
2. How could the American correct his actions?
3. What do you know about 'losing face'?
4. Who lost face in this situation?
5. How should the American have responded when the sales rep told him about his new idea?

18.3. Consider the following situations and decide what is polite in your country.

1. If you are invited to dinner, what should you bring?
2. If someone gives you a compliment, how should you respond?
3. If someone criticizes your work, how should you respond?
4. If a party starts at 7:00, what time should you arrive?
5. If a dinner starts at 7:00, what time is too late?
6. If one of your friend's family members dies, what should you do?
7. If you go to a wedding, what is an acceptable gift?
8. If you have a problem with one of your neighbors, what should you do?
9. If you need to borrow money, who can you ask? Who can't you ask?
10. What is an acceptable amount of time to pay someone back?

18.4a. Cultural Differences: Personal Space

Different cultures view personal space and contact in a variety of ways. Some Europeans and South Americans kiss a business associate on both cheeks when they greet each other. Americans generally shake hands. In addition, Americans tend to stand at an arms-length away from business associates, while other cultures may stand directly next to each other. Some Russian female colleagues walk arm-in-arm, while in other cultures this would be considered more personal behavior, indicating a romantic relationship.

What would you do?

1. You meet a new client from South America. The client leans in to kiss you on the cheek but you are not comfortable kissing a stranger. What would you do?
2. You are talking to a client who is standing too close. You are accustomed to keeping an arms-length distance. How do you create distance without offending the client?
3. You have had a cold for the past few days. A new client reaches out their hand for a handshake. You do not want to spread your germs to the client. What would you do?

18.4b. Cultural Differences: Cues

Western and Eastern cultures have different meanings for the word, "yes." In Western cultures, this word usually means agreement. In Eastern cultures, 'yes' tends to mean that someone understands the message instead of agreeing with the message.

A handshake in American culture means that a deal has been made, an agreement for future business is certain. A period of silence in Eastern cultures may indicate displeasure with a proposal. Direct responses and openness is required in Western cultures while Eastern cultures prefer to save face to avoid disrespecting someone.

1. You proposed an idea to a Taiwanese client. After the meeting, you understood the client's 'yes' as an agreement to do business. After a week, you still haven't heard from the client. What do you do?
2. You had a meeting with an American client. The next day, the American client calls and asks for your order. You had never committed to ordering supplies from the American client. What do you do?
3. You are in a meeting with Chinese clients. You do not agree with their new arrangements. You think these new additions will waste time and money. How do you explain this without making the Chinese clients lose face?
4. You find your new British client outspoken and overbearing. You find the comments too direct and offensive. What do you do?

18.4c. Cultural Differences: Relationships

Western cultures tend to value relationships built on marketing and business practices. Eastern cultures value relationships that are built on family ties or referrals from close friends. Therefore, judgments may be based on family ties, class, and status. Alternatively, Western cultures operate around a belief that everyone in business deserves an equal opportunity. Here, judgments are made according to fairness, honesty, and getting the best deal.

1. Your Thai customer introduces you to a family member and wants you to do business with them. You do not like their products and feel that they are too expensive. What do you do?
2. Your German supplier has offered you a great deal. It involves a 2-year contract with discounted prices on the products. You have only met this supplier once and are not sure how to convince your Japanese boss that this is the best choice for your company. What do you do?
3. Your Malaysian colleague will only do business with close friends, family members, or direct referrals. You have noticed that the contracts this colleague signs are not the best deals and the company is over-spending. What do you do?

18.5. Discussion Questions

1. If you want to 'break the ice' with a new client or customer, what topics are appropriate?
2. If a client from another country offends you in some way, do you say something or ignore the issue? Why?
3. If your client sneezes, do you say anything? What is normally said in Western cultures?
4. Is it polite to burp at the dinner table? Why or why not?
5. If you notice something in your teeth after eating dinner, what do you do?
6. If you notice that a client or customer has something in their teeth, do you say something? Why or why not?
7. Is it appropriate to ask someone about religion? Why or why not?
8. Is it appropriate to talk about politics with new clients? Why or why not?
9. How should you respond when a client or customer says, "How are you?"
10. If a colleague introduces you to a friend, what should you do? Smile? Shake hands? Say 'hello' and look away?
11. You had a meeting with a client at 10:00. You realize that you have been waiting outside of the client's office for 15 minutes. How do you check with the client to make sure that they know you are there?
12. After you have a meeting with a new contact, how do you express your appreciation for the client taking the time to meet with you?
13. If a client's phone rings while you are in a meeting, what should you do?
14. What does someone really mean when they say, 'I'll be in touch'?
15. If a colleague shares some office gossip with you, what should you do? Tell other people? Listen and never repeat it again? Why?