



INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – In Business Meeting

Lesson 5



Version without a key



WARM UP – Think and discuss

- Do you know any tips for an effective meeting taking place in an intercultural environment?



READING. Read the text.

EFFECTIVE MULTI-CULTURAL INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MEETINGS

Of the many areas in international business where cultural differences manifest is in the corporate meeting room. International meetings are an area where differences in cultural values, etiquette, interpretations of professional conduct and corporate rules are at their most visible and challenging to control.

In international business meetings, cultural differences between professionals can and do clash. Although it cannot always be avoided, the negative effects of cultural differences can be minimised with careful and effective planning, organisation and consideration prior to meetings.

Culture influences what we do, say, think and believe. Culture is different in different countries and contexts. In the context of international business it affects how people approach, perceive and contribute towards meetings. A few examples include:

■ Approach to Time

Not all cultures live by the clock. Time orientated cultures such as the British or Germans will have strict approaches to how meetings run. The start time, finishing time and all the different stages in between will be planned carefully. Other cultures will see the start time as an approximation, the finish time as non-fixed and all the different stages in between as flexible

■ Hierarchy

The hierarchical nature of a culture can have a massive impact on the input given by participants in an international meeting. For those from hierarchical cultures speaking one's mind, criticising ideas, disagreeing openly, giving feedback and reporting problems in front of the boss or manager are all areas they would feel uncomfortable with. To offer a criticism of the manager's idea would be seen as a loss of face for both the manager and the criticiser.

■ The Purpose of Meetings

After a few pleasantries in the meeting room, the common term in the West is, 'let's get down to business'. Western meetings generally run to a tight schedule with an organised, pre-planned agenda. Meetings are for business. On the other hand, different cultures see the meeting as the

arena for building personal relationships and strengthening bonds. Getting down to business comes further down the priority list.

When chairing an international business meeting it is always advisable to bear in mind the attendees' cultures and backgrounds. Is it a very varied group or do the majority of participants have cultural similarities? Think about their approaches to meetings. How have they acted in meetings before? Can you identify the cultural reason why?

Following are some guidelines that may assist you when approaching cultural diversity in your next international business meeting.

■ **Meeting Etiquette and Mannerisms**

In highly diverse international companies, one can find participants in a meeting from the four corners of the globe. Each will have their own cultural etiquettes, gestures, mannerisms and ways of expression. Shouting, throwing hands around and even storming out of meetings are all possibilities. In such a company it may be advisable to provide inter-cultural awareness training to staff to minimise misunderstandings. Where differences are not as acute it may be up to you as the chair to understand how certain etiquettes, gestures and general meeting room tactics may be perceived and how you can minimise any adverse impact.

■ **Expectations of Meetings**

Prior to the meeting make it clear what the purpose of the meeting will be. What is the goal of the meeting? Why are you asking each attendant? What do you expect from them? Contact the participants and discuss the meeting and what you require of each person. If ready, send them the agenda. If it is a brainstorming meeting then maybe ask each participant to bring at least three suggestions with them. If it is a meeting bringing together different areas within a company, let each attendant know what people would like to hear about from them. Once a framework is in place people will know where they fit into the picture.

■ **Take a Relaxed Approach to Meetings**

Many people find business meetings daunting. This may be a combination of stage fright, sitting in front of the boss and feeling inferior to colleagues. This will lead to anxiety, tension, nervousness and general discomfort. Try introducing subtle differences to a meeting to put people at ease. Ice breakers offer a good tension release at the beginning of a meeting. Warm ups offer a similar benefit. Try using an alternative setting instead of the meeting room. Consider changes in the lighting or ambience.

■ **Group Sizes in Meetings**

In short, small groups will work more effectively in meetings. Smaller groups offer increased security and allow for greater participation. In international business meetings, using smaller groups can be used in two ways.

First, prior to a large international business meeting identify who will be coming and what they can contribute. Will the meeting cover different topics? Will it require input from different business areas? If you are organised enough you can initiate some smaller meetings where you group participants who are comfortable with one another or who share expertise in the same area. Ask the groups to take their conclusions to the next, larger, meeting. Participants there will now feel comfortable with their contributions and ideas.

Second, if the company culture allows, break your meeting up into smaller groups where feedback and open discussion may flow more easily. Then ask a delegated head of each group to summarise their findings. This may allow those who would not normally speak out in front of larger groups to get their views across.

■ **Multi-Cultural Meetings**

A major mistake made when dealing with diverse cultures in one meeting room is to suggest that those of similar backgrounds work, group or be seated together. Rather than allow for greater fluency in the meeting this will have the opposite effect. Once cosy in their cultural groups, participants will slip into their cultural patterns. It is vital you mix up your meeting. The additional benefit to this approach is that it allows for cross cultural interpersonal relationships to develop, strengthening staff bonds.

■ **Alternative Communication Methods in Meetings**

Most international meetings take on a basic format and structure whereby an agenda is set and attendants contribute to the topic of discussion orally. If you have participants who potentially will be very quiet and non-participatory then consider some alternative methods of communication.

For example, prior to the meeting, e-mail members of staff some questions regarding the forthcoming topics. Give them open-ended questions as to their opinions. Ask them to e-mail back their replies which can then be used to instigate their contribution in the meeting.

If you know some participants are uncomfortable speaking, then why not let them write? Either use a white board or offer to take suggestions and opinions on paper?

■ **Always Confirm Meanings in Meetings**

Different cultural assumptions as to the meaning of a word, phrase, symbol, picture or agreement can cause confusion before and after a meeting. When approaching a topic or after consensus has been agreed upon a subject always confirm that the general meaning has been agreed upon and understood. Where potential problems may exist as to interpretation always simplify meanings. If the meeting will deal with complex language or concepts consider forming a consensus on the meaning all participants will be comfortable with, then circulating them in advance of the meeting for review.

At the end of a meeting, summarise and capture the main agreements and disagreements. Ensure everyone is happy with them.

International business meetings require great planning, organisation and consideration if they are to succeed in offering effective outcomes. Always consider the cultural variants you will be dealing with and think of ways to overcome potential problems. The above mentioned tips are merely basic pointers that will hopefully help you start to think about how culture impacts international meetings.

Source: http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&Itemid=86&id=1268&lang=en&layout=edit&view=article



READING COMPREHENSION

Answer the questions below:

- How is approach to time different in different cultures?
 - *While giving your answer use the following words: non-fixed, flexible.*
- What is advisable to provide in a company to avoid and minimize misunderstandings in intercultural business meetings?
- What are the ways of putting people at ease at the beginning of an international business meeting?
 - *While giving your answer use the following words: release, use, consider.*
- What size groups work more effectively?
- Should the participant of the same cultural background be seated together in a multi-cultural meeting? If not, give the reason why.
 - *While giving your answer use the following words: diverse, vital, allow.*
- In what situations can alternative ways of communication, e.g. writing emails be helpful?
- What is crucial to confirm in every multi-cultural meeting?
 - *While giving your answer use the following words: agree, interpretation.*



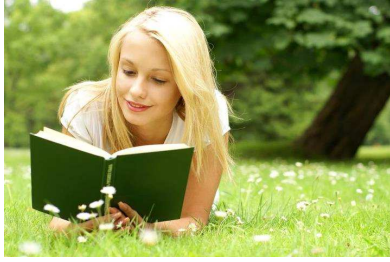
LANGUAGE FOCUS 1 – VOCABULARY PRACTICE

- Exercise 1** - which of the words in the text have the following meaning?

diverse		having a negative or harmful effect on something
acute		different or including many different types
perceive		very serious or severe
adverse		nervous feelings felt by performers before they appear in front of an audience
daunting		having a negative or harmful effect on something
stage-fright		making you feel slightly frightened or worried about your ability to achieve something

Exercise 2 - Complete the sentences below with the words from previous exercise. Some of the words have to be put in a correct grammar form.

1. The country was faced with the _____ prospect of overcoming four decades of division.
2. _____ or performance anxiety is the anxiety, fear or persistent phobia which may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience.
3. The match has been cancelled because of _____ weather conditions.
4. New York is a very culturally and ethnically _____ city.
5. The problem of poverty is particularly _____ in rural areas.
6. How do the French _____ the British?



Read for pleasure and have fun 😊.

RESULTS OF POOR CROSS CULTURAL AWARENESS

Having a poor understanding of the influence of cross cultural differences in areas such as management, PR, advertising and negotiations can eventually lead to blunders that can have damaging consequences. (...) To illustrate this we have provided a few examples of cross cultural blunders that could have been avoided with appropriate cross cultural awareness training:

- An American oil rig supervisor in Indonesia shouted at an employee to take a boat to shore. Since it is no-one berates an Indonesian in public, a mob of outraged workers chased the supervisor with axes.
- Pepsodent tried to sell its toothpaste in Southeast Asia by emphasizing that it "whitens your teeth." They found out that the local natives chew betel nuts to blacken their teeth which they find attractive.
- A company advertised eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring a variety of cute animals wearing glasses. The ad was a poor choice since animals are considered to be a form of low life and no self respecting Thai would wear anything worn by animals.
- The soft drink Fresca was being promoted by a saleswoman in Mexico. She was surprised that her sales pitch was greeted with laughter, and later embarrassed when she learned that fresca is slang for "lesbian."
- When President George Bush went to Japan with Lee Iacocca and other American business magnates, and directly made explicit and direct demands on Japanese leaders, they violated Japanese etiquette. To the Japanese (who use high context language) it is considered rude and a sign of ignorance or desperation to lower oneself to make direct demands. Some analysts believe it severely damaged the negotiations and confirmed to the Japanese that Americans are barbarians.
- A soft drink was introduced into Arab countries with an attractive label that had stars on it--six-pointed stars. The Arabs interpreted this as pro-Israeli and refused to buy it. Another label was printed in ten languages, one of which was Hebrew--again the Arabs did not buy it.
- U.S. and British negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the American company proposed that they "table" particular key points. In the U.S. "Tabling a motion" means to not discuss it, while the same phrase in Great Britain means to "bring it to the table for discussion."

In addition to interpersonal cross cultural gaffes, the translation of documents, brochures, advertisements and signs also offers us some comical cross cultural blunders:

- Kellogg had to rename its Bran Buds cereal in Sweden when it discovered that the name roughly translated to "burned farmer."
- When Pepsico advertised Pepsi in Taiwan with the ad "Come Alive With Pepsi" they had no idea that it would be translated into Chinese as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead."
- American medical containers were distributed in Great Britain and caused quite a stir. The instructions to "Take off top and push in bottom," innocuous to Americans, had very strong sexual connotations to the British.
- In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name into "Schweppes Toilet Water."

In conclusion, poor cross cultural awareness has many consequences, some serious others comical. It is imperative that in the global economy cross cultural awareness is seen a necessary investment to avoid such blunders as we have seen above.