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# Arriving at Consensus in Global Business: Globalization Meets Multiculturalism

by Christyne J. Vachon, Northeastern University

Airplanes, video conferencing, mobile phones, email, texting, and the Internet all represent players in the campaign to make the world a smaller place. Someone halfway around the world becomes as accessible, if not more accessible, than your neighbor. In both our personal and business lives, as we rush forward towards the future, our world shrinks. In the business world, globalization, whether you like it or loath it, must be factored into your program. While the world may seem to be getting smaller, there remain sizable differences in culture. With the advent of technology, we communicate more easily with people geographically far away from us, bringing all of our differences together more spontaneously and frequently. Significant and slight differences in culture affect the ability of business people to arrive at consensus with their foreign counterparts. Each of us exists in our own sphere of influence in the world with those elements of our environment with which we are familiar. The same is true for business. Knowledge of the differences and conscientious intercultural communication will enhance the ability to achieve consensus.

Globalization makes international business easier, if not a necessity, but one cannot overlook the fact that each country, while more accessible, still retains its individual identity and unique attributes and, so too, its business people. To achieve consensus among the diverse people of the globalized business community (whether they work in the same organization or at a business partner), we need to conscientiously make an effort to engage. Conceptually, you can build this approach in three aspects temporally

representing the before, during, and after: (1) Research; (2) W.H.A.T.T. (Watch, Hear, and then Think); and (3) Learn.

## Before

Before entering into the intercultural interactions, first research the issues surrounding the topic of the international interaction. These issues are not just concerned about the hard facts, such as the tariffs, subsidies, and economic integrative units encountered in international business dealings. Instead, your research should also relate to the soft cultural variables such as behaviors, language, norms, goals, and values. From this concept, one may immediately rush to think "Yes! We should research what customs *they* have. Understand *their* habits. Anticipate what they will do and what *their* goals will be." Actually, you first need to articulate your own culture and goals. Know your own culture and goals *as well as* those of your foreign business counterparts in a foreign culture.

Determining your own culture and goals usually turns out to be more challenging than originally thought. Especially in certain places, like the U.S., often people assume they have no distinct culture. The euphemism that America is a "melting pot," by describing all cultures as coming together and melting into one, discredits all of the diverse cultures that dot the American landscape, leading many people, Americans included, to assume they do not have a distinct culture that would affect an international business communication.

Whether we know it or not, our perceptions of others and interpretations of what other people say or do is greatly affected by our own culture and goals.



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Among other things, your own values, priorities, motivators, norms, experiences and language abilities will affect how you perceive the messages others are or are not sending. For this reason, you need to articulate your own culture and goals in order to understand whether you are sympathizing or empathizing with your foreign business counterparts. "To sympathize" you consider what your business counterpart is saying or acting in light of your own culture and goals. "To empathize" you consider what your business counterpart is saying or acting in light of what you understand to be their culture and goals. Ideally, determine whether you are sympathizing or empathizing and migrate your thinking towards empathy. Through empathy, strategically, you will understand your international business counterpart better and avoid time and money lost due to unintentional, intercultural business blunders.

That brings us to the next part of our research before our intercultural business interaction. Research and understand your foreign business counterpart's culture and goals. Among the first issues contemplated when entertaining a decision to enter a foreign market, a venture will usually research and analyze the more obvious, yet important, international business considerations among which include the size of the market, consumer purchasing power, value-add, exchange rate, exchange controls, money market capabilities, rules governing foreign investment, and labor rules. The list is voluminous. Of equal importance, if not more, people building international business relationships must consider the specifically unique qualities of the country and culture with which they have decided to explore conducting business. In the battle to gain the business advantage and improve the chances for consensus and resulting success, the strategic business person needs to become familiar with the culture of the origin of the involved people and their goals. A few topics to start you off on your research path include: general values, time considerations, group dynamics, power dynamics, and gender differences. Culture includes reference

to the social, economic, and political norms as well.

**General Values.** Consider the values and priorities of the culture of your foreign business counterpart. How does the culture treat elders? Are there class differences? Necessary religious accommodations? Emphasis or de-emphasis on material wealth? Emphasis or de-emphasis on knowing one's business partner outside the proverbial conference room? In your research, it is helpful to keep the perspective that the age of your client may also affect adherence to traditional values and priorities. There could be generational differences.

**Time Considerations.** Understand whether the culture of your foreign business counterpart emphasizes punctuality or has a more flexible view of the clock. Is it a culture that views punctuality as essential, anything short of punctuality is an insult to the business counterpart? This analysis may also help you to anticipate a few additional traits, such as whether your foreign business counterpart will require strict adherence to deadlines for completion of projects. In the alternative, the foreign business counterpart may prefer to fully complete a project, no matter how long it extends past the intended due date. Moreover, this *Time* analysis may indicate whether you should anticipate starting your business meeting immediately or whether your foreign business counterpart will prefer to engage in informal preliminaries: a welcoming and extended dialogue, show you around the facility, introduce you to people, take you out to breakfast first, etc.

**Group Dynamics.** At the core of group dynamics, you seek to understand whether the culture is more individualist versus collectivist. If your foreign business counterpart comes from an individualist culture, the culture emphasizes the value of independence and individual freedom and successes. In an individualist culture, people speak for themselves. In a collectivist culture, on the other hand, the group tends to speak for the individual. The foreign business counterpart from a

collectivist culture may tend to place high importance on team building, team work, and unity in purpose. Decisions will be made by a group, probably an extended network, of members.

**Power Dynamics.** Determine whether the tone of the culture as applied in the business seeks to provide opportunities for all and the ability to improve all careers (egalitarian) or whether it is more rigid with clear differences in status and little room for improvement (hierarchical). This tone will indicate to you how your foreign business counterpart relates to authority and suggests how you should act as well. Are titles very important? Should you continue to refer to your foreign business counterpart as doctor? In another context: Will your foreign business counterpart challenge decisions made by upper management? Or, for instance, if the president of the foreign company makes an incorrect statement, should you remain silent or offer a correction?

**Gender Differences.** Analyze whether the culture of your foreign business counterpart is egalitarian, that is, where each person makes decisions for themselves about themselves, has access to education, has the right to own property, the ability to participate in business meetings. In the alternative, you may find that the culture of your foreign business counterpart is male-dominated. In a male-dominated culture, a female may not have access to higher education, the ability to own property, make decisions for herself about herself, or engage in a conversation with a male in business. Most notably, as a female approaching such a culture, you will have to realize that you will have greater challenges to make your voice heard to an audience of both men and women foreign business counterparts, and being heard does not necessarily mean speaking louder.

### **During**

Next, we should consider the **W.H.A.T.T. factors:** *Watch, Hear, and then Think.* During your meeting, conference or due diligence, take the time to watch and hear what your foreign business counterparts

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are communicating. Too often, we are already thinking of what we will do or say next while our counterpart is communicating so we miss important information and clues. Instead, *Watch* and *Hear*, and then slowly take the time to *Think*, particularly keeping in mind the research you have already conducted.

#### **W.H.A.T.T.—Watch**

When you meet with your foreign business counterpart, you watch for non-oral clues. By paying attention, you will learn what your foreign business counterpart is communicating without the use of words. In this sense, your preliminary research is very important as non-oral cues can differ significantly from culture to culture. Examples of types of categories of non-oral communicators are eye-contact, gestures, physical space, and body contact. For instance, a gesture of a shrug of the shoulder with a tip of the head to the side in the U.S. may mean that someone is indifferent or doesn't care about a topic. In Nepal, the same non-oral gesture signals assent and agreement. With your preliminary research, you will know that body language in the culture of your foreign business counterpart may differ from your own. *Watch* to learn from the body language of your counterparts. Understand what certain body language means in the cultures with which you are interacting. In this way, you can be aware of the non-oral communications of your counterparts as well as to *Watch* the unintended non-oral communications by yourself.

#### **W.H.A.T.T.—Hear**

Hear what your foreign business counterpart is saying. Moreover, listen to what they are saying. When you can repeat what the person said, you *heard*. When you understand what the person meant, you *listened*. When you listen, you attend to the words spoken and the message conveyed through pauses, tone, tempo, pitch, and volume. These are non-verbal cues. For example, volume and faster delivery may mean anger or perhaps enthusiasm in some cultures. On the other hand, if your foreign business counterpart is from Japan, they may speak softly

but be equally enthusiastic. For them, soft speaking and evenly spaced speech are signs of proper etiquette and education as well as fine breeding.

Similarly, if you are from a culture that speaks fast, and your foreign business counterpart is not, be aware that your foreign business counterpart may not understand you (language ability aside) and they may also interpret what they perceive as fast speech as evidence of poor education, nervousness, and/or lack of class. As a point of reference, cultures that are often accused of speaking too fast include Italian, Indian, Arabic, and parts of the U.S. Consequent to your preparatory research, you will anticipate communication needs and take steps to avoid certain business blunders.

Another aspect of *Hear* is to engage in active listening. Active listening incorporates the above *Hear* concepts and more. Active listening includes validation as well. Validation tells a speaker that you are listening to what they are saying. Validation may involve nodding your head, smiling or saying "I see," "Sure," "Yes," "Right," etc., as someone is speaking. Again, your prior research will help guide as to which forms of validations are suitable for your foreign business counterpart. For example, in some Asian cultures, smiling may be interpreted as an indication of embarrassment or lack of comprehension. Listen to what your counterpart is saying and pay attention to what your counterpart means. An example of this is when Western cultures meet Asian cultures and the Western culture complains that "yes" means "no" in the Asian culture. What usually happens is that the Western business person understands that "yes" means that her counterpart agrees to everything she has said. When, in fact, the Asian counterpart may be validating the speaker, indicating that they have heard, not that they agree.

#### **W.H.A.T.T.—Think**

Once again, digging into your library of prior research, you will know your own culture and goals. Once you have watched and heard your foreign business counterpart, determine whether

you are sympathizing or empathizing. If necessary, shift to a more empathetic approach.

Similarly, be aware that we each have mental models, assumptions that we make about cultures foreign to our own, sometimes referred to as stereotypes. Mental models are usually outside of our own awareness and are based on our own set of culture, experiences, and knowledge. Mental models serve as a lens through which we view these other cultures and affect the way we watch and listen to someone, our feelings toward that person and what they have communicated, and our own reaction (what we do or communicate back). As part of *Think*, challenge your mental models. First, it is important to not rush your thinking. Take the time to inspect your thoughts. Do you have a preconceived notion? Assumptions? Perhaps you may even ask your foreign counterpart a few questions to further explore your own thoughts. When you have taken the time to *Watch* and *Hear*, then you *Think*. Formulate your thoughts based on what you know now, not independent of what you watched and heard. Your prior research provides you a foundation upon which you analyze the "watched" and "heard" elements.

#### **After**

Third (but I will not say finally since our international interactions never quite end), learn from every interaction and action. Learn from your blunders and your successes. Make notes, write it down. *Note to self*: "Do not put the business card of a Japanese counterpart in back pocket of trousers. Perceived as an insult." Take note of the content results and, equally important, take note of the aspects of the soft variables that you learned so that the next time you will know what works and what does not work.

Through preparation with research of soft, cultural variables and cognizant communication and follow-up, intercultural consensus can be much more accessible as a destination in the global marketplace. ■