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Broad mind for abroad

In the second of a fortnightly series on overcoming cultural barriers, Sergey Frank offers tips on how to prepare mentally for negotiations overseas

Even surrounded by the communications technology of the third millennium, the skills of knowing how to talk to people and get what you want from negotiations remain much as they always have.

Indeed, with globalisation, they are needed more than ever.

They are put to use whenever a professional is arranging to buy industrial equipment, licensing technical know-how, or negotiating mergers and acquisitions. Moreover, they are needed in medium-size and start-up companies, as well as the multinationals where they have long been nurtured.

Yet many people in business are ill-prepared for the international negotiations that they will face. Because they negotiate every day at home, they assume that they will be able to deal just as successfully on the international stage. Because they believe that in important respects business is identical all over the world, they believe that knowing their own business is sufficient preparation for overseas ventures.

But, as I wrote earlier this month, this assumption is mistaken. Business varies hugely from one place to another, exactly as people do - and that matters because direct interpersonal contact is vital in many transactions.

Despite e-mail, the internet, mobile phones and all other forms of modern communication, you need to develop a specific sensitivity for communication and negotiation patterns in other countries.

So here is a mental exercise that is designed to reduce the frequency of nasty surprises when you do business abroad. And the chances that it will succeed are good - after all, business is, by its very nature, used to solving problems, and rapidly too.

1. List the basic assumptions or "golden rules" of business in your own culture. Some examples in the US might be: "Money talks"; "All people are created equal"; "Hard

work is rewarded". Examine how they might differ in the country that is your destination.

2. Does your host country seek to establish equality between the sexes? Sweden or Saudi Arabia, for instance, treat this matter in totally different ways.
3. Make a list of the typical working situations in which you will find yourself overseas and examine how you might have to adjust your behaviour. For instance, how should you greet colleagues, superiors or subordinates? How should you discuss the pros and cons of an action plan? What will it be like to take part in a meeting? How should you behave at lunch with a colleague, client or customer?
4. For one day, take note of:
 - Getting information from people: How direct are you? How else could you go about obtaining information? What is the style of communication in the host country?
 - Systems of motivation and reward: What are your assumptions about what makes people work well and what constitutes an incentive or reward? How do you go about punishing or criticising people's conduct? What incentives will be appropriate where you are going?*
 - Giving and receiving instructions: What do you assume about your role and the role of others in your organisation? What is the expected behaviour and responsibilities that accompany these roles? What relationship should exist between the people in these different roles? How do these roles and relationships differ in your host country?*
 - Making new business contacts: How much time do you spend on social pleasantries? Would more or less socialising be appropriate in the host country?
 - Imagine that your present boss comes from the country where you are going. How does that affect your relations with him or her? Try behaving in this way and observe how your assumptions and responses are affected.
 - Ask yourself whether you are psychologically prepared to cope with all the different conditions and customs when travelling abroad.

This kind of mental exercise should increase your sensitivity towards the way business is done in a foreign country.

It also reinforces the idea that business cultures vary. And this conclusion is vital, because nowhere in business can so much be gained and lost so quickly as in international business negotiations. The next article will apply these lessons to doing business in the US.

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