

Opinion

Networking across cultures: Be aware of differences!

Consider the following scenario: A German manager visits an international business event and decides to interact with a Brazilian manager. They engage in some small talk and the German begins focusing the conversation on business issues such as field of work and business interests. Suddenly, the Brazilian changes the course of the talk and starts addressing topics such as family, holidays and hobbies. The German starts feeling uncomfortable and wonders why the Brazilian is focusing so much on private matters instead of business and starts interpreting this focus on private matters as a lack of interest in developing a business relationship. Whereas the Brazilian gets the feeling that the German is uninterested in getting to know him and, therefore, also in doing business with him. This scenario presents an objective level versus a personal level of interaction between those involved.

Some cultures value close relations and socialization in business life more than others. The trust building process is based on sharing interpersonal knowledge to know who are the people they are doing business with. Other cultures value a more objective approach and tend to be more task-oriented than relationship-oriented when networking.

Trust is valued in all societies and plays an important role in networks. One finds two kinds of trust in business relationships: cognitive and affective trust. The first is related to the beliefs you have in another person's competence and reliability while the latter is based on interpersonal bonds and feelings. The intercultural encounter described above shows that in Brazil, one tends to develop trust through personal bonds and in Germany, through professional bonds.

The communication style, which is highly influenced by culture, also impacts the networking process. High context societies like Brazil tend to have an indirect way of communicating which is rich in non-verbal communication. This means one has to be able to read between the lines to get the full message. Germany, as an example of a low context society, favours a direct communication style. This means expressing your point of view in an unambiguous and clear way.

Building a successful international network requires a sensitivity to the fact that the formation of relationships and networks is strongly influenced by cultural values and norms. Such a sensitivity is called cross-cultural competence, and it allows one to exit cultural cruise control in the scenario above and be able to cater a bit more to the needs of one's vis-à-vis.

«The formation of networks is strongly influenced by cultural values and norms.»

Christiane Koncilja is Lecturer for Cross-Cultural Competency Development and Cross-Cultural Training and Teamwork at the Bern University of Applied Sciences Business School.

