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CULTURAL ESSENTIALS FOR SUCCESS IN ASIA

Seven Tips for Success

1. It isn't necessary to *like* everything about another culture. That's unrealistic. But it helps to accept that other cultural viewpoints have validity and merit respect.
2. It also isn't necessary to *understand* everything about another culture. That's hard for an outsider. But you can try to learn about the issues critical for success in your role.
3. Your first aim doesn't need to be tolerance and openness but professional effectiveness.
4. Your initial reactions are likely to be biased. This is true for most of us. Pause and go for a second reaction instead.
5. If something goes wrong, look for the problem. Don't blame the people. Try to figure out the source of a misunderstanding. Select a strategy, carefully monitor how it goes and keep trying.
6. When communicating, signal your intention (e.g. explaining, requesting, warning, or reporting). Provide background information to make your thinking clear. Ask other people about their purpose and meaning.
7. Repair any misunderstandings as you go along. Don't let them accumulate. It can help to state any problems or uncertainties you may be experiencing.

Culture as a risk factor

It's now generally accepted that Australia's future is intimately bound up with Asia. There are economic, strategic and obvious geographic reasons why this is so. Consequently, the conversation has shifted from 'Will we engage with Asia?' to 'How can we engage?'

It's a reasonable question. While the Asia-Pacific region is rich with opportunity for Australia, it's also fraught with complexity and cultural risk. Things can go wrong, as Rio Tinto and Jetstar have shown us recently.

The challenges Australian organisations face in Asia are like complex and interwoven puzzles. The key that unlocks the solution to these puzzles is 'cultural intelligence'. We hope this newsletter will provide you with a few cultural essentials to get you started on a rewarding engagement with this fascinating region.

Why is 'cultural awareness' insufficient?

The focus of 'cultural awareness' is on increasing your appreciation of the role that culture plays in shaping who you are and how you behave. In contrast, the aim of 'cultural intelligence' is to go beyond this in order to become more competent and adaptable in another culture, not just more aware of it.

It's common to meet people who are aware of cultural differences and are also very well-intentioned, yet they're unable to achieve practical results amidst the complexity of real life. They have the motivation but lack the skills to do anything different from their usual Australian approach.

This is why cultural intelligence should be a requirement for all those whose roles take them into Asia. The term captures three interconnected dimensions: attitude, knowledge and skills. The way people interact is closely linked to their cultural identity and the assumptions they hold about thinking, relating and communicating. The goal is to bring insight and skills to bear in complex settings where things can appear strange and confusing. Without this capability, strategic objectives beyond national borders can falter and even fail.

The monolingual risk

As English becomes an international language, Australians can be seduced into believing they don't need to make much effort: after all, we can use English in many settings. However, English is not a culture-free language and, indeed, there are few words that have exact equivalents in other languages.

There are variations in, for example, the constructs held across Asia of leadership, management and teamwork. It's these deeper issues that cause the most significant risks because each party tends to believe that others are approaching the exchange just like them.

Different ways of thinking

When we talk about culture, we mean everything that makes up the world view of a group of people. This includes their behaviours, beliefs and values. These have been determined by historical experiences and reinforced through the socialisation process, as well as by the form

and structure of the particular language spoken. Language and culture are like right glove and left glove.

Many different studies have identified contrasting sets of cultural values. Knowledge of these and how they vary provides a useful foundation for developing the skills needed to be effective in Asia. Different cultural value systems form a fundamental, yet usually hidden, level of meaning when people from different societies work together.

The challenge is that, while all cultures have remarkably similar values, they can rank them in a different order of importance and relevance. Understanding these different rankings helps us to analyse the underlying cause of a misunderstanding and so propose a more effective strategy.

Different ways of communicating

Another measure of competence is the ability to deal effectively with the different communication styles that have developed to best reflect each value system. Communication style has been described as one of the most striking meeting places of language and culture.

Many key features within a given communication style are adopted even before a child learns to speak fluently, for example intonation. This helps us to understand that the way we communicate is central to our identity and is also carried with us into our second language. The objective is to learn about these different styles and how to manage their impact in those settings of most concern.

Building skills

Awareness and knowledge aren't enough to ensure effective performance in culturally complex settings. We need to know what we must *do differently* to get the results we want, selecting an appropriate skill from a solid repertoire. In an ideal world, we would have the time to build country-specific skills, acknowledging the tremendous diversity of cultures that make up Asia. But for most Australian professionals, this is a luxury beyond their reach.

For this reason, we recommend a basic skill set which is portable across the region and applies to most situations. An important focus needs to be on how to clarify meaning (because you won't understand everything) and how to repair misunderstanding (because you will make mistakes).

You and the other person may bring different assumptions and expectations to the event, with different ideas about the most appropriate role to adopt. Bring out into the open any cultural differences you feel might be getting in the way. You can say, 'I think we might be coming at this from two different perspectives. My reason for saying this is ...'

Break your message into small chunks and use pauses to encourage feedback. Check information by repeating back what you think you heard. Small things like these can promote clarity and mutual understanding.

Equipped with a basic toolkit of skills, you can behave in the way most likely to promote collaboration and success. In the end, your cultural intelligence will be measured in terms of the outcomes you achieve for yourself and the organisation you represent.