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East vs. West Expectations

Relationships in Western business settings

1. Based on values of independence and non-imposition.
2. Limited and defined by law and contract.
3. Time and attention regulated.
4. A line between 'self' and 'other.'

Relationships in Asian business settings

1. Based on values of in-group interdependence, mutual advantage, favours and obligations.
2. Not constrained by law and contract, fluid and responsive.
3. Time and attention not calculated.
4. A circle drawn around 'we'.

These two different sets of ideas can produce different expectations about appropriate roles and behaviours, leading to misunderstandings.

The solution is to ensure clarity on what each side can reasonably expect from the other. Don't assume that because you are using the same term, you necessarily share the same mental model about what it means!

THE MEANING OF RELATIONSHIPS IN ASIA

Different views about a relationship lead to trouble

During their visit to Anchartech's Sydney offices, the head of a Chinese delegation asked to speak to Geoff Reid, Asia-Pacific Sales Director. Several members of the delegation had met Geoff on his trips to China. They regarded him as a friend and were surprised to learn he was overseas. They assumed he would make contact immediately on his return. Geoff did not. So the Chinese repeatedly asked for his home number so they could call him over the weekend. But Geoff didn't meet them until his return to the office on Monday. He explained he'd been tired after his long trip and had wanted to spend time with his family. But from the Chinese perspective, he'd failed to act as a genuine friend: relations soured and Anchartech lost a lucrative contract

Concept of relationships pivotal in Asia

The importance of relationships is a recurring theme when those with experience of doing business in Asia get together. Indeed, it's also highlighted when people from different Asian countries talk about themselves. It acts as a backdrop against which ideas about contracts, time and negotiations begin to make sense as elements within a coherent system.

Yet just what the term 'relationship' means across the countries and cultures of Asia can be poorly understood in the West and contribute to difficulties in achieving business success.

The source of the problem is that it is natural to seek to understand an idea by simply translating it. But translation can seduce us from the truth by suggesting that concepts have exact equivalents across cultures. We can imagine that there are universally accepted solutions to all human dilemmas and challenges – if we can just get past the barrier of different languages. A dictionary can be a false friend in this regard!

Same term, slightly different constructs

When differences occur in what groups mean by the same term, we can be pretty sure we have stumbled across a word that is signalling a hinterland of cultural priorities, values and traditions.

The mental model of business relationships generally held in Western countries is based on core values of independence and a wish not to impose on others. It's centred on friendship but this comes second to the limitations and constraints imposed by contracts, arrangements, schedules and personal inclination. Our lives are often lived in compartments.

Across Asia, on the other hand, taking on a new relationship means becoming a member of a type of in-group, with strong bonds of mutual advantage and obligation. These bonds are frequently strengthened through reciprocal favours, assistance and protection.

Relationships are, therefore, not entered into lightly or abandoned easily. They may involve long term, mutual commitments that can surmount the inevitable setbacks, changes and ups and downs expected in an imperfect universe, characterised by constant change.

Implications

These different concepts held by East and West lead to different assumptions and expectations about what constitutes a relationship and how it should be conducted. In practice, each side unconsciously follows an unwritten script which determines what is said and done at certain points. But the scripts are not the same. The roles and responsibilities of each party can be viewed differently. What is regarded as relevant in the business relationship may not be shared. The potential for clashes and misunderstandings becomes obvious when these differences are exposed.

Meetings: a practical example of the problem

The allocation of a brief amount of time to relationship building at the start of a meeting, and then 'down-to-business' does not reflect the significance attached to good relations in Asia. Western business people may simply package their awareness of 'relationships' into a swift greeting or a cursory enquiry about health. This approach doesn't look like relationship building in Asian terms and it risks appearing hypocritical.

The need to know a bit about you

Since relationships involve creating long-lasting bonds that incur obligations and responsibilities, they are not entered into without due care. Hence a person's background, their character and sincerity, and the connections and networks they possess all need to be probed. This can feel like a fairly slow and delicate process of sounding out.

Working on the relationship is always part of the agenda

It's important to monitor the health of business relationships. The ability to take the temperature and notice how things stand from time to time means that harmony can be promoted. Thus face is maintained and embarrassments avoided.

If there's a problem, the Western tendency is to retreat to the contract. But the Asian view is that relationships should be responsive to fluctuations. They are not simply a pleasant 'spice of life' in the good times but a resource when bad times come.

If a breakdown occurs and is not repaired, there's a risk the network of connections where this particular relationship is situated will close ranks. The person not respecting their obligations will be viewed as untrustworthy. Trust, rapport, face and relationship are inextricably bound together across Asia.