

## **The Culture of Business - In Perspective**

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Is “Business” a globally accepted set of norms and values?

Around the world people take numerous courses in business management and administration. Many texts are published and the use of them is sometimes redundant from location to location. This allows for a degree of continuity for the principles and theories of business practice. The MBA programs that people complete prepare them for the anticipated or perceived needs of companies worldwide.

So, logic may dictate that everyone with an MBA, for instance, has a shared platform of knowledge, a tacit understanding of how business administration should be pursued and implemented – correct? On the face of it, yes, but you perhaps are forgetting the human equation.

I have attended various business and social functions in the region and have heard first hand the conventional thinking of expatriates and local residents alike. What is being said publicly and what is being said privately are not in alignment when it comes to the way either side views and conducts business. Text learning becomes secondary in light of the more basic human perceptions that define the day-to-day life of people. Some current perceptions are that Westerners are “telling us what to do” and that western management styles are weak and ineffective within this region. On the opposite side, the expatriate community has expressed frustration with getting anything accomplished and sometimes views their counterparts as uncooperative.

Each of us brings to our careers our cultural heritage. Americans apply their knowledge from an MBA in an American cultural context, as will the English, French, Russians, or any cultural group. Culture sets the conscious and subconscious framework, the norms and values, upon which we put into operation our business behaviors. Chances are you never thought about it, recognized it, or realized the degree of effect it has daily. For instance, from an American approach they currently value a participative management approach. Everyone should have “buy-in” to the decisions affecting them. Americans believe that individuals have great value (as opposed to communitarian cultures valuing the group) and through a reinforcement of that value we achieve greater success. Okay, that’s special, now what in the hell is the company paying you for?? You’re the leader – lead – you are the manager – manage! Why do you waste MY time asking what we should do when you have been hired to make decisions? This is Kazakhstan – not the United States or Great Britain or Germany.

From 1991 forward representatives from many nations brought to Kazakhstan new ideas and methods, assuming that these would be uniformly embraced and enthusiastically implemented. Here again, we have failed to analyze the effect of human behavior in light of the initiation of change. To some degree radical change has been brought to bear in this region. Some have indicated that there was the belief that the values and norms (i.e. Soviet Culture), imposed or chosen, which were in place when the expatriates arrived, would simply disappear because “business is business”. No, it is not all the same everywhere you go. In the next article I will discuss the differences between national culture, corporate culture and business culture

Frankly, I must agree with the sense of indignation that is expressed at times by local residents. These are not people to be taken lightly, to be underestimated, or to be treated as children that are in need of your tutorage and kindly guidance towards prosperity. Perceptions are dangerous. The backlash that occurs are, in part, the elements of “bandit capitalism” that exist. Strong and visible efforts must be undertaken to create an atmosphere of working with each other not for each other or against each other!

This region has a rich history and an outlook on life that should be understood and appreciated. You don't have to agree, accept or adapt it – you need to understand why they do what they do. As much as expatriates do have something to offer Kazakhstan, it is my firm belief that residents of this country have something to offer the “guests” of Kazakhstan as well.

You are from a developed country, or a developing country – frankly, who cares? Relationships are formed through shared beliefs, norms, values and experiences and anyone has the ability to transcend ethnocentric or nationalistic motivators if you view your counterpart as first and foremost being just another human. Second, you view “differences” between ethnic or cultural groups as the foundation for learning, which creates a second level of understanding.

In November of last year I was asked to speak with a committee of the “Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan”. One of the questions presented to me before my talk was for me to express my opinion regarding “globalization”. There seems to be a strong debate and expressed fear among conference participants regarding ensuing globalization and the disappearance of ethnic identity. I hope you recognize the danger here? Vis-à-Vis, the greater the interaction with outside ethnic and cultural forces (like expatriates for example) the greater the degree of pollution to the base ethnic identity.

My response was simple. My professional observation is that ethnic identity is not lost, polluted, nor is taken away from you – you give it away.

There is a clear trend in this nation. The trend is towards greater animosity and isolation and insulation from one another. This is the fault of both the expatriate and local resident. You can chose to take a hold of this issue and realign the perceptions, or ignore perceptions and gamble on human nature. If history is any guide, which do think is the better road to follow?

Responsible comments, issues for discussion, questions and observations on doing business in Kazakhstan are always welcome and may be sent to Mr. Wright at:

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