

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

Reversal of the Cultural Hierarchy

By: Stephen G. Wright

Most people are very familiar with the following terms and their applications:

Super Powers
Industrialized Nations
Developing Nations
Third World Nations

What is it that brings expatriate firms to this region? There is opportunity here through the emergence of new markets. There are examples of organizations that have come to help establish a better infrastructure. There are some that come to create social, religious, political or judicial reforms.

For the most part expatriates tend to view themselves as coming from well developed countries with high levels of industrialization. Some expatriates will also discuss their home nations in terms of having cultural advancements as well. Certainly the United States views itself as being the “last” Superpower. People from some other nations have used that term to describe them as well.

As usual, I believe that perception is a nasty bit of business.

Is there a globally accepted criterion for the ranking or stratus assigned to a nation? Well in terms of GNP, cost of living, rate of inflation, currency exchange, living standards, to name only a few – yes, there are ways to set the bar for a nation being in one of the above major categories of economic / political positions in the world community. However, have we assessed all the variables to the equation?

In the context of historical national and ethnic cultures it seems that many have failed to learn basic lessons. Viewing your interaction in this nation requires a multidimensional approach – nothing less will do.

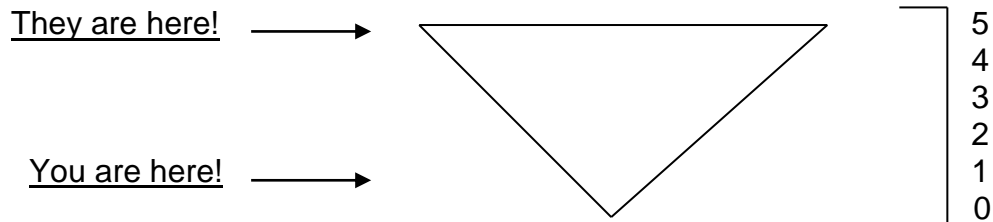
Let us assign a value, on a scale of 0 to 5, to the lone “super power” as a 5. We can visualize developed / industrialized nations as a 4.5 to 5. The developing nations shall range towards the middle of the scale. The poor “third world” nations unfortunately are at the lower end of the scale. However, as I am sure you are prepared to argue this scale is subjective as it is transitory in nature. A nation need not always be at the bottom and a nation may not always hold a top position. After all – stuff happens! The socio-economic and political variables change and so would the ranking on the scale. Recent history has most adequately demonstrated this point.

Many of you would say that in part your mission here is to assist the people in Kazakhstan to move up the scale a bit. By your definition perhaps – but have you considered the reverse value?

If you take the same scale and plot positions based upon cultural factors such as, the degree of group support, stability of norms and values, commitment to

members of the group, length and amount of oral history, extent of group traditions, interaction and balance with the natural environment, you may see a surprising result. Groups of people (their historic relationship, perhaps not the most recent) that have been defined as primitive and lacking civilization will be higher on the scale than you guys!

You can visualize this as a pyramid. On the first scale the great and powerful culture groups are at the pinnacle part of the pyramid. When we use another scale to assess the situation.....



The many groups of economically developing people in this world make up the greater share of the pyramid, and in some cases have been around much longer than you have. Therefore in these instances their cultural development is more intricate and relies upon the more human elements of life and less upon the technological development. They would be in the 4 to 5 category and you would be in the 0 to 3 range. This is not to say in any way that one group is inherently superior to another. That would be called ethnocentrism. In my own research I have found numerous examples of commonality among humans that, I wish, would be viewed more carefully as a method of unification and not divisiveness.

The lesson here is very simple. As you view your role here, please bear in mind that you can, AND SHOULD, be learning about life and how these people have historically dealt with it and lived it. You have much to offer, however you still need to outwardly and noticeably show a little respect towards the heritage and potential of the nation you are in. The Soviet era is by far not the sum total of the existence of this region. It was but a dot on the page of the cultural heritage of many of the peoples in this region!

Mr. Wright has 12 years of field experience in 5 nations of the F.S.U. Some of his clients for seminars in cross-cultural relations, business communication strategies and "Understanding the U.S. Culture for Strategic Advantage" include, Gazprom, The Ministry of Transportation and Defense of Saudi Arabia, Bechtel, USDA Graduate School, and Georgetown University. Between 1996 and 2002 Mr. Wright was a member of the Associate Faculty in the MBA Program at Johns Hopkins University, School of Professional Studies in Business and Education. In the 1979 Mr. Wright received his undergraduate degree in Political Science from The American University and in 1990 he completed graduate studies in Management at Cambridge College. He is now doing research for a Ph.D. in International Relations.

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