

## The Culture of Business - In Perspective

### Same Thing – Different Day!

By: Stephen G. Wright

Each year there is some new form of book, cassette, video, and training program offered regarding the lack of synergy being built between organizations and various national cultural groups in the global arena. Given the research that has been carried out on the problem, it has not yet produced definitive methods, or best practices, for a long-term resolution of the basic issue presented. During a seminar I gave to introduce the concept of International Relationship Management I was asked, "Aren't there any best practices?" I seem to think that there are and lesson number one in this case is to stop gambling your money, time and resources on those cross-cultural training providers that rely upon the use of buzz words and play upon your perceptions.

Why do we still face the challenge of cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity in light of the empirical research and programmatic offerings constructed up until now? Does the issue not affect companies or individuals economically in a manner sufficient for them to heed the warnings and the answers provided? Could the problem be dramatically overstated? Is effective cross-cultural competence more a problem for somebody else, but not here? Indeed, have the right questions been asked in the first instance?

I have long since lost count of the times I have been told that a company has a program in place and they are doing okay. Yet, previously some employees will have indicated to me that things are far from okay. Similarly I have been shocked by the type of training being offered, the degree to which it fails to address the core of the issue, and also the lack of direct and relevant background of some of the people offering the training. These are some of the base reasons why there is so much available on cross-cultural competence and so little in the way of long-term results.

Business opportunities are business opportunities, and everyone likes to be first on the band wagon of profit. So there will be all kinds of people out there saying that they can solve your problem. You will not believe me but solving the problem is the wrong approach for this region.

Lesson number two is to focus a little less on cost (i.e. we can get it cheap) and more on estimating the potential for a long-term return on the investment against the potential losses in employee turnover and dissatisfaction. Even worse is the emergence of local employee animosity that simmers beneath the surface. Understand that this stays beneath the surface until it is too late. I have yet to see or

hear of someone that is addressing the core issues. What I have seen is akin to placing a band-aid on a cut, time after time, and not asking the more fundamental questions. This idea should be correlated to the article in which I mentioned the reliance of most Westerners to value the reactive approach (conflict management) as opposed to a proactive approach!

Some time ago I had a conversation with a person attached to a U.S. based organization in Almaty. They have had many different people give cross-cultural training seminars, and they are frustrated and angry with the lack of results. So they had this real bright idea that they are going to resolve the problem internally. Why spend all this money and effort for outside contractors? They believe they can put together a program on their own. My response is that a person that is thoroughly capable in training methods and development is not best suited to create, unilaterally, a long-term solution to the problems encountered in cross-cultural relationship building. This is NOT their area of expertise or educational foundation. Nor should you ask local residents alone to put together a cultural program. As I have pointed out more than once, to deaf ears, anyone over the age of about twenty five to thirty is still heavily influenced by Soviet culture. Kasakhstani culture is reemerging, it is not there yet. You need to be creating programs in a wholly different direction!

Cross-cultural competence training is built upon asking the right questions first and secondly it is not placing reliance upon a short-term quick fix. I agree that you cannot afford to keep throwing money out on the same issue repeatedly. While you can buy the cheaper pen, it still writes just as an expensive variety will, but how well will it write, for how long, and will it break apart because of poor construction? If you need to write, and you need reliability, just remember the old saying, "You get what you pay for". The same is true for this kind of training or consultations being offered. The secret is in finding solid, applicable, cutting edge content, coupled with the right degree and type of reinforcement!

One variable to this little mess is that everyone has an opinion about living and working in other nations. Long ago in Washington I met with a newly appointed Vice President for the Russian Division of a major U.S. telecommunications firm. During our conversation I made a suggestion about working within the post-Soviet environment. The gentleman became indignant and said, "I have lived in three different countries, I think I know what I'm doing!!" His Russian counterpart, also at the Vice Presidential level, sat there with raised eyebrows and a look of exasperation on his face. Okay folks, you still believe that since you have lived all over the world, you know what you are doing. Simply having the experience of being overseas **is not** in and of itself sufficient training for issues rooted in cultural norms and values or

implicit cultural factors you often are not exposed to. Experiential knowledge is peripheral at best.

If you do not already know this information, try this for a change – do an internet search on the cost of expatriate turn over in overseas postings, 1994 to date. Determine your cost for repatriation of employees. Discover the level of turnover in various firms for the expatriates once they return home. Determine the savings for a high retention level of expatriates. Now, do the same estimates for local employee turnover and retention. Figure out what you have lost or gained. Can you tell me you have this situation solved? If you have this all nailed down then I and a lot of others really need to know (sgwglobal@yahoo.com). After all why should I waste my time and someone else's money writing a column that has no relevance, when the answer has been found to the issue? However, if your cost in time, money and effort in order to achieve a stable business environment is still high I'd advise the following; you can buy a pen that works for now – or you can buy a pen that gets the job done – consistently!

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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