

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

The impact your organization and you have on the community!

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For the Kazakhstan Monitor

The function of this column is to raise critical questions, as well as to generate thought and discussion on topics relevant to us all now. We must always be willing to wonder if what we do, say and how we act is striking the right cord for our lives and the lives of those around us. No one person is always correct in their assumptions simply because they believe themselves to be right.

Since 1992 I have had a great deal of professional experience in Russia, Bulgaria, Moldova, as well as in Central Asia. In all these years it never ceases to amaze me how little time, effort or priority people put into the concept of “culture” as a strategic element to successful business. A simple check of the literature on cross-cultural relations will raise one question: every year people write papers, books or create seminars on cross-cultural problems in order to resolve current issue on the topic – WHY? You would think that by this time reliable best practices had been developed that could be repeatedly applied for everyone’s best interests.

The key to the problem appears to be in a basic misunderstanding. What are we speaking about when we discuss culture? Is it national / ethnic culture, corporate cultures or the all encompassing excuse of global business culture? It has been stated to me that there is a culture of business that transcends national or ethnic elements and serves as a foundation from which business can be done anywhere. A basic restatement of the “business is business everywhere you go” line I spoke of in my article last week.

When any group of humans takes up residence within the national boundaries of another group of humans something occurs to both groups involved. Expatriate workers bring with them, both consciously and unconsciously, elements of the culture they come from. Regardless of the culture of business, or a particular corporate culture the root influencing variable to each of these is the core national or ethnic identity chosen by you and the group you associate yourself with.

Your cultural norms and values in turn have an impact on the host nation. The local culture conversely has an impact on you. This is why expats experience “reverse culture shock” when they return home. Due to the fact that you are within a culture that is in transition you more easily affect them. Logic would indicate then that you hold a degree of responsibility for the impact you have on the local society.

My question has always been – to what degree has the expatriate community investigated the impact it has here? If it is positive, then how is that defined? Who is doing the defining? Is there any bias involved? If your impact here is negative what are you doing about it? How shall you turn your impact around from a negative to a positive influence?

Oh, by the way, if you are looking for local residents to walk up and tell you that you are making a cultural mistake they won’t. Point one: One does not insult a guest / Point two: You are the meal ticket; one does not bite the hand that feeds them. This is why their feelings regarding the expatriate community are usually discussed in private, quietly and away from those that could transmit those feelings publicly. This

is what has been told to me by numerous local residents. You may place any degree of reliance upon this information as it may suit you.

What you are responsible for doing is to go to other countries having instituted a program of "Cultural Due Diligence (C.D.D.)" ahead of time. This is applied in a marketing context, a public affairs context, and a corporate responsibility context. Most importantly this needs to be viewed within the context of your expat workers and their families. Sometimes it is the family of the expat that has the greatest degree of negative OR positive impact upon the local social structure. You need to evaluate your current cause and effect relationship with your host nationals and begin creating a positive relationship model based upon the criteria for an optimum C.D.D. return on investment – just that simple! Losing face with the local community costs you opportunity and money; losing employees causes a high turnover to retention ratio and that means money out the door also.

Sometimes learning is best done as a process of self-discovery. Good luck!

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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