

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

Measuring Change!

By: Stephen G. Wright

Often I hear it said that if I had seen Kazakhstan 10 years ago I would be astounded at the degree of change that has occurred. There is no doubt that much change has indeed taken place. Before we all start to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate each other on how splendid a job that is being done; please be certain of the type of changes taking place and for whom.

In three separate instances expatriates have told me they were creating “success stories” for their home offices, or government, as that is precisely what they wanted to hear. These actions were undertaken due to the fact that a lack of success stories will equate to the end of funding. Are such actions in the best interest of this nation? Are fabricated success stories the norm or the exception? In either case what is the exact nature of the social, economic, and political changes taking place?

To date I have not seen any studies that have been done on the broad effects of the transition from Soviet society in Kazakhstan. Please contact me if you know of any as I shall be most interested in reviewing them. In terms of a business focus there is data that can be reviewed, yet business variables alone do not address the need for measuring change. One colleague pointed out to me that there are shops opening all over that were never there before and that is a very positive indicator of economic change and free market effectiveness. It is an indicator, yes, but in hard reality of what, for whom, and for how long? The right variables need to be addressed so that we are making a clear distinction between sustainable positive social and economic change or just plain bandit capitalism.

Keep in mind that there is an historical (very much a cultural variable of the Soviet era) belief that it is better to live for today. The idea is that if you have good fortune now; enjoy it while it lasts because everything will surely disappear. If you have money in your pocket you spend it. A truly fascinating and humorous illustration of this cultural predisposition can be seen in the film, as adopted by Mel Brooks, “The Twelve Chairs”. Many Russians I have known have said that the opening song, “Hope for the best, expect the worst” is a very good representation of Soviet and post-Soviet mentality for average citizens. Truly we are not yet working with a Kazakh society, but a post-Soviet one for at least for one or two more generations. Societies do not change overnight, never have and never will.

The key to change measurement is found in the number and kind of critical questions that are asked across the broadest scale possible of the Kazakhstan society.

- What specific segments of society are benefiting from the transition from Soviet society? What is the percent of the population that is experiencing patterns of positive quality of life changes?
- In terms of lifestyle, what are the perceived comparative advantages to the free market system vs. the soviet society over the last ten years and what realistic advances in lifestyle can be reasonably projected for the next ten years?
- Looking at the most vulnerable segments of the society, (i.e. the elderly, the poor, the very young, orphans, the mentally or physically handicapped) define

and clearly detail the advances made for them in services provided for their daily needs, or opportunities for financial and lifestyle assistance. To what degree has the transition placed into society mechanisms for proactively addressing the root cause for these segments to be vulnerable?

The three areas above are only a starting point. It is possible that the core business readers will focus their thinking on the economic advances being made. The questions I have illustrated for consideration appear to be skewed towards quality of life issues. Please remember what I have said so many times; perception can become a truth. Consider also the words of Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Minister for Nazi Germany: "A lie repeated often enough becomes the truth." Source: <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/6/sciquotes33.htm> Whether any perception is truth or a lie, it is still something held as having a degree of relevance to the believer and it is in what the average citizens believes that our success or failure is defined.

A drastic change has occurred here in a very short time. The population has gone from a "cradle to grave" socialist support society to the free market, "everyone creates their own opportunity" form of existence. By any measure these forms of society are on opposite extremes. Upon what measure will the people of this nation hold YOU to account? – Quality of life!

So, why is any of this important to the business community? We must measure and support the issues for quality of life first (Hospitals, Schools, and Social Services). Hand-in-hand with quality of life must be infrastructure (quality of roads, housing, water, air, trash removal, electrical service). Can you tell me how we are doing on these fronts? Local citizens I have been in contact with have commented that everything is still much the same as before, just different people doing the same things, getting the same results and the average citizen lives just as did before – hand to mouth. If the previous statement is not a reality people, PROVE IT! We have to be able to show that our initiatives in business, government, education, and social change are of benefit to the broadest spectrum of this society possible, not simply smoke and mirrors (i.e. fabricated levels of educational advancement, continued funding only to support an on-going income, programs for the sake of saying you had a program not for insuring sustained change). Do not laugh at or ignore comments that suggest life was better during the Soviet days. These comments can create an undercurrent that is dangerous, damned dangerous. It usually manifests itself in the open as Nationalism.

To be fair, as I try to be, there is another view on this issue. Not very long ago I described what I have written above to an official with USAID. The reaction was one of surprise followed by the statement: "I think you have misread the situation entirely. People here are embracing change. There are more opportunities now than ever before!"

This is not our nation. We all need to be highly self-critical of what we are doing here if only to insure that we maintain mission focus. When you can show Kazakhstan that the people who live in Yurts feel better about their life, and the future of their children, THEN we can tell the people back home we are doing a good job – until then – keep doing some reality checks, just to make sure! Your business, your investments, or more may depend upon it!

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
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