

# How does an intercultural coach support leaders doing business at an international level?

As an intercultural coach and consultant I work with leaders, managers and employees of international companies. Those companies which realize the importance of cross-cultural communication and challenges of multicultural teams, usually arrange cross-cultural coaching for their leaders, managers and employees as soon as they arrive in a new culture.

The others ask me to conduct an intercultural training or coaching when they already deal with barriers in communication in their teams working on international projects.

In history we know many examples of failures when companies didn't manage challenges of cross-cultural differences at the level of their management and team work. One of such examples was the merger of Daimler and Chrysler.

When people from different cultures meet, there are several questions related to the way how they should introduce themselves, how to arrange their first meeting, how much time should be devoted to "small talk" or how to agree on a final agreement. Businessmen usually pay a lot of attention to their product's introduction, technical details but very often they miss a crucial fact that their partner originates from a different business culture.

## Therefore, let me ask you what is culture? What role does culture play in business?

There are many definitions of culture and many ways how people understand culture. The most common understanding is that culture could be defined by means of language differences, the way how people dress, what food they eat or what customs they have. In other words, all these aspects are called visible culture.

However, for businessmen, there are some other aspects which determine their business success. They determine how people understand deadlines of delivery, how they respect the terms and conditions of a contract or how they communicate their disagreement.

Therefore, let me introduce you two key dimensions which each businessman should be aware of doing business and managing people internationally. Those leaders and managers who realize their importance, take cross-cultural coaching each time they move to a different culture. They know that such a coaching session could save them a lot of time and misunderstandings. Despite having been in international business for several years, they do not come to a new culture with the opinion: "I do not need an intercultural training."

The first dimension which belongs to so called invisible cultural layers is the dimension of power. Whether businessmen come from the culture which is so called "low power distance" or "high power distance", it determines their decision making or the way how they communicate.

The representatives of low power distance cultures emphasize equality in their teams. Their team members take their position as one of team members and they are approachable decision-makers. They include all team members into decision making and encourage dialogue. Therefore, decision making could take longer and businessmen from high power distance should not

expect that a final decision will be issued only by one person. They should be open and willing to share information with all representatives involved.

## What questions should a businessman, leader or manager ask before having negotiations?

They should think about the way how negotiations will be conducted, what roles business partners would have, how much respect senior members will be given or what formality is expected in a verbal or written communication.

Having asked the abovementioned questions will help them to avoid misunderstandings especially when representatives of high power distance feel offended by not having been given a special treatment. There happened some cases when delegation members were not seated in agreement with their protocol and negotiations simply did not happen. Or a young director was sent to negotiations with a senior director on behalf of a business partner.

Recently one client shared the case when a head of Japanese representation in their company refused to communicate with a female head of their department.

The look at a second dimension gives an idea how do people approach a task and how much relationship building is important for them.

Relationship-oriented cultures find it important to get to know each other before doing business together. They devote some time to looking for common interests and connections. The representatives of task-oriented cultures find it as time wasting and do not see any purpose behind it. However, relationship-oriented cultures view relationships as the gate to common projects and long-term cooperation. Trust is developed just discussing hobbies, experience and having a longer small-talk.

I have already heard many stories where companies lost their business just because of their expectations from the first business meeting. Relationship-oriented cultures do not expect to sign a contract during the first meeting. They would like to know who they are going to do business with. And their trust to company is based on their trust to their representative. If he/she leaves, they start from zero.

Arranging the first business meeting with a potential business partner, I would recommend asking the questions focused on both sides' expectations. It would save money they invested into its preparation.

Each of us has "cultural software" in our heads. It means some preferred ways how to conduct business negotiations, how to introduce a new project or share instructions. Managing colleagues of a different cultural background or negotiating at an international level, requires upgrading our cultural software. The purpose of cross-cultural coaching session with an intercultural coach is to touch those aspects which have a serious impact on conducting business.

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