

International Negotiations: Considering Culture

When you are negotiating with a person from another background, it is important to pay attention to cultural differences in communications, as well as what people expect in terms of the issues. You may not interpret their behavior correctly unless you are aware of different non-verbal expressions or cultural expectations. **It is crucial to talk with someone from that culture before you negotiate.**

Below are a few of the issues for your attention:

- **Relationships** – in many cultures, developing a relationship before discussing issues is crucial.

For example, in Spanish cultures, relationships are very important. Having a person who introduces you is helpful. Network with mutual friends before you begin a negotiation. When you start a negotiation in a culture that values interpersonal skills, spend more time on developing the relationship and try to negotiate in person rather than on the phone or email.

- **Time** – the sense of time varies greatly among cultures and with individuals.

For example, in Japan, the decision process may move more slowly and any attempt to impose deadlines will be interpreted as inappropriate impatience. North Americans are usually interested in quick action and immediate results. This may also be important in some European cultures. However, these values may not be important for people from other cultures.

- **Language**

If either or both parties do not share the same first language, give time for people to understand what has been said. The language being spoken may be the other party's second or third language. Keep your phrases simple and clear. Don't assume understanding, don't use colloquial expressions, and check to make sure the messages are being heard. If the language is your first language, speak more slowly than you normally would. If possible, have key points written to share later in the discussion.

- **Communication**

In some cultures, it is important to discuss subjects that are unrelated to the negotiations before talking about the issues. This preamble is part of building the relationship, and it would be considered rude to start the negotiation without it. In other cultures, there may be an expectation that the parties will focus on the issues and not reveal other information. For example, Russians are sometimes very careful about what they say, and may revert to speaking in metaphors or symbols, relying on nonverbal communication, and saying less in the preamble phase. At other times, they can be very frank, depending on the situation. Learn about "safe" subjects to discuss while building the relationship, such as books, films or current events.

- **Distance**

It is helpful to negotiate without a desk in between – sitting in comfortable chairs at an angle is less confrontational. However, be aware of how close you can be to a person in talking over issues. In some cultures, space is an important non-verbal cue.

- **Eye contact**

In many Eastern cultures and in the Native American culture, you do not make direct eye contact with a person who is older or has more status. In the U.S. and other cultures, if you do not make direct eye contact, it signals that you are not trustworthy.

- **“Face”**

“Face” means having integrity, respect, and honor. It is especially important in China and other Eastern countries. Face equals a good reputation, which is usually acquired through experience and age. It can be gained by not making mistakes or by compliments given to you by others. It can be lost by being impatient, rude or making mistakes. Giving truthful compliments to others conveys respect, which is important in all negotiations.

- **Open sharing of information** – sharing some information develops trust.

Sharing of information will vary with both cultures and individuals. If you are negotiating with a competitive person, it is best to share selectively. One U.S. scientist, in a negotiation with French scientists, was pressured to call the funding agency right in the same room, rather than wait. The French scientists wanted to settle the negotiation that day, emphasizing both open information and time constraints.

- **Decision Making**

Be aware that the decision-making processes and time frames may be different. Check with a person from that culture to understand the usual processes before you start the negotiating. Be upfront: “I’m not very familiar with your culture or the decision-making process here – is there anything I should know?”

- **Listen carefully during negotiation discussions and take breaks to check with someone from the culture, if necessary.**
- **Be sure that the person has decision-making responsibility**
- **Trust your intuition and be respectful**

There are a number of websites on negotiating internationally – here are two:

<http://www.ism.ws/pubs/Proceedings/confproceedingsdetail.cfm?ItemNumber=11131>

<http://www.crossculture.com/services/negotiating-across-cultures/>