Cultural Differences Are More Complicated than What Country You’re From
by Andy Molinsky
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As part of doing business globally and operating across cultures, we often want to predict how others are going to behave. Our typical heuristic, understandably, is culture. We read a book, an article, or a blog post about cultural differences. We learn about how Germans or Chinese or Italians are different from us – how they think or act or even express emotions in a different way – and we feel like we’ve done our homework. We feel prepared.
But we’re often surprised to discover that the person in question acts in a completely different way from how we anticipated. Instead of being reticent, our colleague from Asia is actually quite loud and confrontational. Instead of behaving aggressively, our Israeli supplier is mild-mannered. And as we encounter various other people who confound our expectations about cultural differences, we wonder where we went wrong.

The problem comes from the questions we ask ourselves. The obvious one is “What culture does this person come from?” This question is not irrelevant. National cultural differences do matter. The way you network in India does tend to be different from how you network in the United States; the way you motivate employees in Japan is quite different from how you do so in Canada.

But thinking that national cultural differences are all that matters is a mistake. Culture isn’t everything. It turns out that if we ask ourselves a better, more focused set of questions, we’ll be far more successful at anticipating how people will act and preparing ourselves for these differences.

**Question 1: What do you know about the region?** Just as it is useful to learn something about culture norms when diagnosing your situation, it is good practice to learn something about region norms. For example, if you were doing business in the United States and assumed that people from the Northeast would be quite similar to people from the South or from the Midwest, you might find yourself surprised. Similarly, you’d be misguided if you assumed that Southern and Northern Italy are identical or that people from rural and urban areas of China tend to act in similar ways.

**Question 2: What do you know about the company or industry?** Like countries and regions, companies and industries also have distinctive cultures. How you would interact with a boss at Google is quite different from how you would interact with a boss at Microsoft or Intel. Meetings at traditional, bureaucratic organizations are often run quite differently from meetings at small startups. Norms for behavior in the advertising industry are quite different from norms for behavior in the agricultural industry, and so on.

Of course, sometimes the culture of a company will reflect the culture of a region or a country. For example, a traditional Saudi steel company in Riyadh may very likely have norms that are traditionally Saudi, such as a relatively high level of power distance. But imagine the cultural norms of a global consulting firm like McKinsey that also happens to be in Riyadh. Because the consulting
firm is a global organization with norms influenced both by the local culture and by its Western “DNA,” chances are that the firm would have norms that are actually slightly divergent from the Saudi norm.

**Question 3: What do you know about the people?** Finally, ask yourself what you know, or what you might be able to find out, about the people you are interacting with. Are you communicating with a 60-year-old senior executive or a 20-something manager? People who are older are often more likely to reflect the norms of the overall society. It would also be useful to know if the people you are interacting with are *locals*, born and raised in that particular setting and without extensive travel experience, or if they are *cosmopolitans*, with extensive travel background. Locals are much more likely to reflect the norms of the immediate region you are in, whereas cosmopolitans are likely to be open to a wider range of potential behaviors.

The role that you are playing in a given interaction matters a great deal as well. For example, many East Asian and Southeast Asian cultures, such as India, China, and Korea, have relatively indirect norms of communication, especially from a subordinate to a superior – whereas superiors in these cultures are often quite direct with their subordinates. It’s critical to understand the role that you play in a given situation in order to diagnose the appropriate cultural style.

Finding the answers to these questions before you cross cultures can be tricky, but it is possible. Books and articles will often give you some insight into these nuances, but one of the best ways to anticipate what you’ll encounter is by talking with expats: people similar to you who have studied, lived, or worked in the country in question. These individuals have a nuanced perspective on the challenges you’ll be facing and what you’ll experience in the specific situations you find yourself in, along with insight into the people you’ll be working with.

Doing your homework before entering a new culture is one of the keys for success. But unless you ask the right questions, you might end up mistakenly overlooking the real differences that matter.
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