

Become a Better Leader With These 5 Cultural-Awareness Tips

Understanding and embracing cultural differences is a key leadership trait in today's hyper-connected global economy.

Peter Gasca



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We now live in a hyper-connected world, where cultural borders have become blurred with the adoption of technology and the increase in diversity in our workplaces. Without a doubt, successful entrepreneurs and managers need not only understand these cultural differences but embrace them as well for the many benefits they offer businesses.

Unfortunately, I too often feel like our business culture is moving backwards faster than it is going forward.

Part of this problem is media, as we are inundated with television programs that do little to help us further our understanding of other cultures. We have taken one step forward with shows such as *Modern Family* paving the way to more acceptance of our diverse American family, but then two steps back with shows

such as *Fresh Off the Boat*, which albeit hilarious, does very little to curb cultural insensitivity and more to promote harmful stereotypes.

With that said, adapting to other cultures need not be difficult, requiring only a little awareness and acceptance of our differences. Here are a few tips on culture that will help make you a better multi-cultural business leader.

1. Language

Fortunately for Americans, English is the global language of business. We should not be proud, however, of our uni-language capacity, as there is a great deal of respect to be had by managers who at least attempt to learn another language. In addition to respect and promoting cultural accord, learning a foreign tongue can actually increase your cognitive and learning skills. Think you are too old to start? All it takes is the courage to begin and a little perseverance.

The best piece of advice I have received in regards to learning a second language at an older age is to have a shot of tequila to lower your inhibitions. Note: Avoid this tip if you are listening to language lessons on your drive to work.

2. Non-verbal cues

It is important to remember that not all cultures have the same non-verbal cues as us. The way we present and carry ourselves and even how we dress is quite different than most other parts of the world. For instance, the adoption of yoga pants into your business attire could (and should) carry severe ramifications.

Also, the observance of personal space (or the lack thereof), physical contact and a host of other traditional behaviors can also get you into trouble if you are unaware of them. Become acquainted with how other cultures give non-verbal cues, and at the very least, learn the greetings from other countries so you can make a shining first impression.

3. Time observations

In the U.S., we have a very structured approach to time (monochronic), viewing it as a tangible commodity than can be spent, saved or wasted, and we place great value on regimented schedules and tasks. Other cultures, such as some Asian and

Latin countries, have a polychronic view of time and tend to be less focused on every moment and more on traditions and relationships. These cultures are less formal and are not ruled by precise calendars and schedules (siesta anyone?). When doing business, these two views of time can conflict and be incredibly frustrating.

There is also cultural differences in time orientation, which can have a dramatic effect on how we determine motivations. For instance, American are extremely future oriented, in that we are always looking toward the future. Because of our constant pursuit for a better future, we save in our IRA accounts and plan our lives many years out. Our motivations are often measured in achievements we hope to have in the future.

Other cultures, such as former Soviet republics or some countries in Central America, are present oriented, meaning they do not look to the future for their benefit and instead seek to maximize return today. After decades of economic uncertainty and wild currency fluctuations, the future is nothing that can be predicted, much less planned. Again, how different cultures view time is an important understanding for managers to consider.

4. Roles and status

In America, we place a great deal of emphasis on hard work. We laud billionaire entrepreneurs who are barely old enough to drive because they risked, struggled and succeeded. Many countries, however, do not have these same entrepreneurial opportunities, and therefore success is typically only achieved through years (age) and experience. In these cases, younger business professionals are expected to respect older peers, regardless of education, achievements or socioeconomic status.

Also, America has come a long way in eliminating prejudice in the workplace, accepting and promoting minorities and women much more often, for example. Granted, we have a long way to go, but compared to other influential countries that are much more male and race dominated, we are doing well.

All of this is to say that while you may disagree with the role that seniority and status play in other countries, when doing business you should do your best to be respectful of the norms and traditions of these other cultures.

5. Motivation

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published a paper called *The Theory of Motivation*, in which he first introduced what has become known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. His theory, which has since been widely adopted as one of the leading theories of human developmental psychology, helped shape how we look at motivation.

In his theory, Maslow theorized that human motivation falls into one of five categorical needs, starting with the very base needs of water, food, shelter and sex, the absence of which the human body cannot function properly and will ultimately fail. As you move up Maslow's hierarchy, human motivations evolve, from the need for basic safety, to love and belonging, to self-esteem and finally self-actualization.

Maslow taught us that understanding where others live in this hierarchy will influence how we interact and deal with them. For instance, an individual whose motivations rest at the bottom or middle of the hierarchy may be motivated by job security and pay (safety) and acceptance by a team (sense of belonging), while those thriving at the top are motivated by advancement opportunities and recognition (self-actualization) far more than salary.

How you rally a team and, hence, achieve success depends greatly on how you interpret the motivations of everyone involved.

In the end, entrepreneurs need to have a strong understanding of different cultures in order to lead and motivate global teams. If you want to know where you stand, consider taking any one of the number of cultural sensitivity tests online. You may be surprised at how you perform.

If nothing else, a little more understanding can help you avoid major faux pas during your next business meeting. I just hope yoga pants become one of those faux pas.

