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## Understanding Cultural Differences is a Priority

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### **Industry Q&A**

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U.S. companies striving to market their products overseas, adapt to ownership by a foreign firm, or work with a multicultural workforce can become truly successful only when they recognize that the key is operating with sensitivity toward the culture and communication style of their international colleagues.

#### **Q.: Why is culture so important?**

**A.:** Because, for example, U.S. business failure internationally rarely results from technical or professional incompetencies. It is often due to not understanding cultural differences in how people from other countries work, communicate, do business, and interact with each other.

Cross-cultural experts have found most issues that arise when dealing with people from other cultures—whether developing business, negotiating contracts, evaluating job performance, or a personal situation—are really cultural issues.

#### **Q.: Can you explain a little more about what cultural differences are?**

**A.:** Every culture in the world has developed its own set of values, attitudes and beliefs that motivate the way its people behave. These values come from the country's unique history and geography as well as from personal influences on each individual such as family, schools attended, friends, religion, political system, media, local community, etc.

As a result of these cultural differences, behavioral styles differ significantly from country to country. What is considered customary and appropriate in one country may be considered unusual or even offensive in another.

So before interacting with a colleague from another country, whether you're in their country or working together here in the U.S., it's important to "do your homework". Do some background reading and learn about that person's country, culture and history. Ask your international colleagues questions about their country, culture or anything you don't understand. Most people love to talk about their country. Show genuine interest and listen to their answers. For example, if you aren't sure how to correctly pronounce their name, ask them.

#### **Q.: Can you give some examples of miscommunication or misinterpretation in business situations?**

**A.:** One of the most important aspects of doing business in many cultures outside the U.S. is developing relationships first. In the U.S., we tend to do business first and then get to know the customer better as business develops with them (although relationship selling is becoming very popular in the U.S.). For many U.S.

Americans, time is frequently an issue. We often don't feel we have the luxury of taking time to build relationships with international associates because we need to achieve goals, get the contract signed, etc. And usually there is a great deal of pressure from management to accomplish these tasks.

In many other cultures, they need to get to know you first. That's why, for example, an American having a business dinner with an international colleague might find there is little or no discussion of business during the meal. It may take place at the end or not at all because the business meal is often viewed as an opportunity to get to know each other. They want to find out if you can be trusted, do you keep your word, do you respect them for *who* they are (a human being), not *what* they can do for you. Personality and character are very important. If an American rushes this process, it could be interpreted as lack of interest and they might lose potential business.

**MS. COAST** is president of International Development Resources and president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Western PA., Inc. Her company provides consulting, keynote presentations and training programs that enable people from different cultures to communicate and work more effectively together. To receive a free copy of her "*Tips for Communicating Across Language Barriers*", email her at [rcost@worldnet.att.net](mailto:rcost@worldnet.att.net) or call (412)381-2055.