

People To Watch

Beyond black and white

Rhonda Coast's passion is to expand the definition of diversity

by Michael Miller

You exchange business cards with a Japanese counterpart. He places your card face up on the table. You take his card, flip it over, jot notes on the back, jam it in your wallet, slip your wallet into your back pocket and sit down.

"American businesses have no idea how much international business they lose through seemingly innocuous acts that offend people in other cultures," said Rhonda Coast.

As president of International Development Resources, Ms. Coast prepares businesspeople for the differences they will encounter in other cultures.

In Japan, turning a card face down, writing and then sitting on it can be interpreted as a symbolic act of disrespect.

Another common mistake Americans make is misinterpreting physical closeness.

"In Brazil, people stand very close to talk," Ms. Coast said. "Americans, especially men, are uncomfortable with that; they often think it is a sexual thing."

One of Ms. Coast's training exercises involves having two people talk while supporting a small index card between them. That approximates the closeness many Latin American cultures utilize.

Ms. Coast has been teaching cross-cultural awareness for more than 13 years. Ten of those were spent with Westinghouse, where she worked as manager of communications and training and manager of human resources programs.

But in late 1995, she was laid off. That was one month prior to her wedding.

"I'm grateful I had the wedding planned; it provided me the opportunity to reflect and decide what I wanted to do next," she said.

"Timing was everything."

It took little deliberation for Ms. Coast to decide her next step. Using her own capital, she set up International Development Resources in her Mount Washington townhouse.

"I was asked by Duquesne University to establish a cross-cultural course," she said. "At the same time, I became an instructor for Berlitz International." The latter is a 120-year-old language services firm based in Princeton, N.J.

She continues to serve as an adjunct professor at Duquesne.

Ms. Coast's Westinghouse relationships have served her well; a contact who moved on to Bayer Corp. got her involved in Bayer's efforts to acclimate some of its traveling employees. She has worked on a relocation program for a Canadian couple moving to Germany and on a Doing Business in Germany presentation for the Robinson Township firm.

Another Westinghouse contact led her to the Pittsburgh Pirates, translating for Latin American players and teaching pitcher Francisco Cordova to speak English. She has worked for the baseball team since 1996, managing the translation of an off-season conditioning manual from English into Spanish and working on a cultural awareness display in the team's weight room.

"It helps for the players to be able to show their home country on a map and explain their origins," Ms. Coast said. "And it helps when the Pirates recruit in Latin America, to show they have a culturally aware environment."

Greg Johnson, traveling secretary for the Pirates, said Ms. Coast has played a major role in acclimating several ballplayers.

"Most of the players are eager to learn. They understand how important it is to adjust to living here. When we call (Ms. Coast), she's a big help."

A Pittsburgh native who speaks Spanish and French, Ms. Coast holds degrees in education and foreign languages from Geneva College and the University of Pittsburgh.

She has worked on cross-cultural issues for Pitt, Marconi Communications and the U.S. Department of Commerce. She said the industry standard for the services she performs ranges from \$2,500 to \$5,000 a day, depending on the particulars of each job.

In September of last year, Ms. Coast was selected by the Pittsburgh Council for International Visitors to visit the Ukraine as part of its Community Connections program. The program offers training opportunities in the United States for entrepreneurs and professionals from the Ukraine.

She conducted presentations on starting a small business and marketing skills and consulted with Ukrainian business owners.



Getting laid off by Westinghouse one month prior to her wedding may have been fortuitous for Rhonda Coast % she used the time to decide her next career move, eventually starting a business.

■ PBT DOSSIER

Rhonda Coast

President, International Development Resources

■ **Family:** Married to Wayne Price, a PNC Bank Corp. vice president

■ **Favorite pastime:** "Reading books about other cultures, watching travel shows."

■ **People may be surprised to know:** "I played alto saxophone for many years, but no longer practice; I've lost my lip."

■ **Opinion on proposed Marketplace at Fifth and Forbes project:** "I see both sides of the argument but I do wonder if Pittsburgh is the type of community that will support the high-end stores being talked about."

Stephen Haluszczak, project coordinator for the Oakland-based PCIV, said Ms. Coast was chosen because even as she teaches, she is learning. "She is very sensitive to cultural issues because she experiences them as she trains," he said.

Ms. Coast also has worked in Germany, Canada and in such American cities as Cleveland and Atlanta, but said Pittsburgh is her only choice for a home. "Pittsburgh has everything a large city has, with the arts and activities, without the crime and traffic problems," she said.

She also finds time to serve as president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Western Pennsylvania, a post she was elected to hold last June.

We need to broaden people's definition of diversity," she said. "Beyond black and white issues, Pittsburgh is part of a global marketplace and needs to know that diversity includes many, many cultures."

MR. MILLER, special reports editor, may be contacted at mmiller@amcity.com.