

Immerse yourself in different culture groups

To know the road ahead, ask those coming back



Working in a multi national and multi cultural environment requires leaders to stay open-minded and flex their behavior. Leaders have to contend constantly with different cultural backgrounds because their teams come from different countries and usually are spread over multiple locations or continents. This adds logistic challenges,

- as you have to work across time zones
- encounter language difficulties
- meet in various locations and thus usually spend a lot of time on airplanes.

From my coaching sessions I have learned that most daunting cultural gaps result from socio-historic traditions and manifest in differences of behavior, communication and local set up.

The mix of cultures gets even more complicated, when we look at subcultures that develop within corporations: You have functional cultures - the marketing team versus finance team vs. the engineers. They all have their respective customs, habits, own language (just think acronyms in corporate) sometimes even the way they dress, etc. Of course you also have groups that share culture based on gender, age, social background, religion, etc. Many big corporations grow with acquisitions or mergers and also need to integrate different company cultures and values.

The most formidable challenge of all is of course if you as a leader find yourself in strange lands with a different language and different customs.

A good example for a leader immersing himself in a new culture comes from one of my coachees, he agreed to let me share this with you. He is managing a Joint Venture (JV) for an automotive MNC in China. In the JV situation in China this requires a high level of trust, which is not made easier by the cultural differences, both of countries and companies. He took his time to understand the situation in the joint-venture (JV).

He spent half his work time on site and experienced difficulties the JV employees had first hand. All his staff reporting to him from the JV side for example did not have the same access rights to the companies Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems –This caused substantial problems for his teams and stopped them to do appropriate forecasting and planning. As this was a decision made by HQ, he could not change the access rights and still needed to work with two different systems. He also had to put a lot of effort into building trust. He also learnt that his predecessor did not spend much time in the joint venture. He understood very quickly that the local staff was tired of having Expat bosses exchanged every 3 years. The Expats earned multiple times of what the locals

got, did not understand the local issues, did not trust them with information. They didn't speak Chinese and every single one tried to impose his way of running the business on them. They did not listen or take time to understand the local setting properly.

My coachee realized his most important task was talent management and identifying the local staff who could take over some of these Expat positions. He started with different team development workshops to remove the 'Them versus Us' attitude. And just under one year he managed to create the 'China Team' spirit. By creating a new joint group he was able to remove a lot of the internal tensions. He put the global values of his company in local context: he used a bottom up approach to define how the values are lived in daily work locally. He said the most important change he made was spending quality time with his teams and really listening to the different motivations and concerns.

To be able to understand all these diverse interests and shape them into synergies rather than letting them develop into conflict it makes sense to be part of these different culture groups for a little while and spend time with them.

The Chinese say 'To know the road ahead, ask those coming back':

- Learn the customs and explore new lands
- Make an effort to learn the language
- Speak to the person who had the job before you and ask how they worked with that team or that team leader
- Immerse yourself in your corporate subcultures, whether they are functional or location based
- Derive synergies from the differences rather than applying the same set of rules everywhere, put them in local context
- Develop trust with local teams, spend time with them and listen
- Don't assume anything and approach everyone with an open mind
- Use and foster local talent

Just remember, there is no right or wrong, it's just different. Even though quite a few things in any different culture will feel very wrong to you, don't assume anything. Most conflict stems from wrong assumptions, so you certainly don't want to assume what motives lie behind behavior. If you open your mind and actively leave your comfort zone to spend time with people who are normally not your kind of crowd, you might be amazed what you can learn! This doesn't necessarily only include people from the ethnics of the culture you are immersed in or working with. It can be about anyone you usually tend to avoid, because they trigger some sort of negative reaction in you.

If you approach people with an open mind and listen, you will find something interesting in everyone. Let them talk and listen to how they see the world, broaden your horizon. Sometimes that might just learn something you'd never do or cannot relate to, but it's still interesting and different. The least you can learn is that you can spend time with people you have next to nothing in common with and just stay in the moment. Mostly it will open your horizon and give you a glimpse of other worldviews seen through different lenses.

Julia Atkinson is Executive Coach and Consultant with more than 8 years experience of living and working in China. Prior to starting an executive development firm, Julia spent 10 years leading teams in the IT and Telecommunication industries. Julia can be reached at julia@atkinson-coaching.com, www.atkinson-coaching.com