

The pervasive impact of culture on international negotiations

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The pervasive impact of culture on international negotiations The primary purpose of this section is to demonstrate the extent of cultural differences in negotiation styles and how these differences can cause problems in international business negotiations. The reader will note that national culture does not determine negotiation behavior. Rather, national culture is one of many factors that influence behavior at the negotiation table, albeit an important one. For example, gender, organizational culture, international experience, industry or regional background can all be important influences as well.

Of course, stereotypes of all kinds are dangerous, and international negotiators must get to know the people they are working with, not just their culture, country, or company. The material here is based on systematic study of international negotiation behavior over the last three decades in which the negotiation styles of more than 1, 500 businesspeople in 17 countries (21 cultures) were considered. The work involved interviews with experienced executives and participant observations in the field, as well as behavioral science laboratory work including surveys and analyses of videotaped negotiations.

The countries studied were Japan, S. Korea, China (Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong), Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Russia, Israel, Norway, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Canada (English-speakers and French-speakers), and the United States. The countries were chosen because they constitute America's most important present and future trading partners. Looking broadly across the several

cultures, two important lessons stand out. The first is that regional generalizations very often are not correct.

For example, Japanese and Korean negotiation styles are quite similar in some ways, but in other ways they could not be more different. The second lesson learned from the research is that Japan is an exceptional place: On almost every dimension of negotiation style considered, the Japanese are on or near the end of the scale. For example, the Japanese use the lowest amount of eye contact of the cultures studied. Sometimes, Americans are on the other end. But actually, most of the time Americans are somewhere in the middle. The reader will see this evinced in the data presented in this section.

The Japanese approach, however, is most distinct, even sui generis. Cultural differences cause four kinds of problems in international business negotiations, at the levels of: Language Nonverbal behaviors Values Thinking and decision-making processes The order is important; the problems lower on the list are more serious because they are more subtle. For example, two negotiators would notice immediately if one were speaking Japanese and the other German. The solution to the problem may be as simple as hiring an interpreter or talking in a common third language, or it may be as difficult as learning a language.

Regardless of the solution, the problem is obvious. Cultural differences in nonverbal behaviors, on the other hand, are almost always hidden below our awareness. That is to say, in a face-to-face negotiation participants nonverbally—and more subtly—give off and take in a great deal of information. Some experts argue that this information is more important
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than verbal information. Almost all this signaling goes on below our levels of consciousness. When the nonverbal signals from foreign partners are different, negotiators are most apt to misinterpret them without even being conscious of the mistake.

For example, when a French client consistently interrupts, Americans tend to feel uncomfortable without noticing exactly why. In this manner, interpersonal friction often colors business relationships, goes undetected, and, consequently, goes uncorrected. Differences in values and thinking and decision-making processes are hidden even deeper and therefore are even harder to diagnose and therefore cure. These differences are discussed below, starting with language and nonverbal behaviors.