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Cultural training puts everything into context

NANCY WEINGARTNER

When it comes to international development, one world doesn't fit all. Here's why you need to be trained before your train leaves the station.

A franchisor's international team must stay at the nicest hotels, dress to the nines and spend leisurely time getting to know prospects over good food at fine restaurants. But before they get to that step, they need to visit and play tourist.

It's a tough job but somebody's got to do it.

Actually, it is a tough job—and not everyone can do it.

Traveling internationally is grueling. Often once the executive lands, he or she jumps right into the business of the trip.

"You need people who can work 18 hours, entertain and then get emails at night," says Pamela Pappas Stanoch, founder of the Athena Group Int'l, a Minneapolis-based consortium of international experts who help companies do business overseas in the most diplomatic manner possible. Stamina, plus a healthy lifestyle—"exercise, eat light," she advises—should be part of the job description.

International deals involve finesse, but they also require cross-cultural training, according to Pappas Stanoch.

Language isn't the only barrier to entry. Every culture has its own learning style, its own ways to communicate and its own context—as in, "low context" (such as the U.S.), which only wants the basic facts at first, or "high-context" (like Brazilians), who want to know everything—your leadership, growth plans, bottom line, etc., Pappas Stanoch says.

These are generalities, of course, but for the most part they ring true, which is why there are numerous books and training programs out there to help executives put their best foot forward, not in their mouth.



Pam Pappas Stanoch

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Other cultural nuances to note: "Are they a consensus-driven country or independent—everyone for themselves," she says. "You need to understand the values. How do they build relationships? How does trust work for them?"

Think of trust as a bank, she says. "In the U.S., we operate on high trust," she explains. If we meet someone and like him or her, we tend to trust that person. That's not always the case in other cultures. For instance, in Brazil, she says, people tend to have a lower level of trust and therefore foreigners need to make "deposits in their trust bank." Deposits are made in a number of ways, such as by establishing credibility through multiple meetings, calls and follow ups on promises.

Another visual Pappas Stanoch uses is the "circle of relationships." A mistake many companies make is having one person form a relationship with their foreign partners. When employees move on, the point-person is no longer inside the "circle" and a brand-new relationship has to be forged. And that can waste valuable time.

How you dress for these meetings is important as well. While the U.S. is going toward a more casual dress code in the workplace, that's not always the case overseas. "Men have to step up their game," Pappas Stanoch says. "Shoes are important, they need to be shined and stylish." (In other words, leave your comfortable trade-show shoes at home.) Women, too, need to be fashionable, and to dress more feminine, she says.

And while doing business research, don't neglect your cultural homework. Know when the holidays are so you don't show up when everyone is on holiday, or plan a big dinner out when their religion calls for fasting. Family days are also non-negotiable in some cultures.

Cross-culture training can run anywhere from \$3,200 to \$7,500, which while not cheap, is just a fraction of your overall costs, she points out. All the better to learn from those who went before you to minimize your surprises abroad.



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