

COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURE

TIPS FOR CHINA

(notes from a seminar conducted by the AOC)

The Cultural Iceberg

Culture is like an iceberg - the tip is the part everyone can see and what we base many of our assumptions on. A culture can appear strange and sometimes frustrating because we don't understand the values and belief systems. Wherever possible, take time to ask questions and learn more about the new culture you are working in.

SURF

- Stop and suspend judgment
- Use your observation skills
- Recognise and respect difference
- Find common ground and be flexible

What Outsiders often notice about China...

- Chinese colleagues may defer to senior staff without questioning decisions
- Introductions are often formal, particularly when meeting for the first time
- People use surnames rather than first names
- Chinese people may appear reluctant to take individual responsibility or initiative
- Hospitality is expected as part of business
- Queueing is uncommon
- Contracts are considered flexible starting points rather than final agreements
- Government has a significant role in the business sector and government officials may be involved in negotiations or meetings

What is considered important in the Chinese culture...

- Respect for hierarchy and social order, involving the concept of "saving face" in order to maintain harmony
- Relationships are vital. It is important to develop good relationships to be successful at work.
- Indirect communication is considered polite
- Group harmony is as important as individual gain

To be polite:

- Use family names rather than first names prefaced by Mr/Mrs, Director, President (titles). If in doubt, ask the person how they would prefer to be addressed.
- Understand the local hierarchy and treat people with respect according to their position.
- Avoid confrontation and display deference
- Give business cards with 2 hands. When receiving a business card take the time to read it in front of the person.

Be aware of:

- Avoid publicly disagreeing or arguing with Chinese colleagues, particularly if they are in a more senior position
- Beware of being too direct.
- Meetings are often used to gather information rather than make a decision.

- Negotiations may take longer than in Western cultures and decisions may come at the last minute.
- Chinese colleagues may not be accustomed to being managed by someone younger than they are.
- Chinese colleagues may be reluctant to speak English if they are lacking confidence in their language ability.
- China is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state - don't assume it is one market.
- Avoid conversations about the political situation.

Tips for communicating with the Chinese:

- Learn a few Chinese words and include these in emails, face to face meetings, etc. (eg: Hello, Thank you, Goodbye).
- Use neutral language - no blaming. Keep things pleasant. There is a Chinese saying - "Catch flies with honey, not vinegar".
- Everything is negotiable; emphasise mutual benefit. Keep "digging" if necessary.
- Listen for "cues"; the Chinese won't say "no" but they might imply it in another way. Note: "yes" and "no" are not words in the Chinese language.
- Pitch questions for an answer other than "Yes" or "No".
- Be flexible.
- "Touching" (eg: hand on arm) is very limited.
- Use the subject line in an email (ie: not "Hello", for example). Be specific.
- Avoid slang.
- Don't point.
- Follow up phone calls with emails
- Use the long form of the date (ie: 24 February 2007). The abbreviated date form for the Chinese is yy/mm/dd so shortened date forms will be translated inaccurately.

When giving gifts to the Chinese note the following...

No's:

- Remove the tag if it has been "Made in China"
- No expensive gifts
- No clocks
- No knives or letter openers

Yes's:

- Clip-on koalas (for children only)
- Simple pins
- Macadamia nuts
- Royal jelly honey
- Sheep lanolin cream
- Sheepskin or kangaroo skin products
- Ceramics
- Something from your city/town