

Effective Multi-Cultural International Business Meetings

In international business meetings, cultural differences between professionals can and do clash. Neil Payne of Kwintessential shows us how to minimize the negative effects of cultural differences with careful and effective planning, organisation and consideration prior to meetings.



by Neil Payne

One of the many areas in international business where cultural differences manifest is in the corporate meeting room. International meetings are an area where differences in cultural values, etiquette, interpretations of professional conduct and corporate rules are at their most visible and challenging to control.

In international business meetings, cultural differences between professionals can and do clash. Although it can not always be avoided, the negative effects of cultural differences can be minimised with careful and effective planning, organisation and consideration prior to meetings.

Culture influences what we do, say, think and believe. Culture is different in different countries and contexts. In the context of international

business it affects how people approach, perceive and contribute towards meetings. A few examples include:

Time

Not all cultures live by the clock. Time orientated cultures such as the British or Germans will have strict approaches to how meetings run. The start time, finishing time and all the different stages in between will be planned carefully. Other cultures will see the start time as an approximation, the finish time as non-fixed and all the different stages in between as flexible.

Hierarchy

The hierarchical nature of a culture can have a massive impact on the input given by participants in an international meeting. For those from hierarchical cultures speaking one's mind, criticising ideas, disagreeing openly, giving feedback and reporting problems in front of the boss or manager are all areas they would feel uncomfortable with. To offer a criticism of the manager's idea would be seen as a loss of face for both the manager and the criticiser.

The Purpose of Meetings

After a few pleasantries in the meeting room, the common term in the West is, 'let's get down to business'. Western meetings generally run to a tight schedule with an organised, pre-planned agenda. Meetings are for business. On the other hand, different cultures see the meeting as the arena for building personal relationships and strengthening bonds. Getting down to business comes further down the priority list.

When chairing an international business meeting it is always advisable to bear in mind the attendees' cultures and backgrounds. Is it a very varied group or do the majority of participants have cultural similarities? Think about their approaches to meetings. How have they acted in meetings before? Can you identify the cultural reason why?

Following are some guidelines that may assist you when approaching cultural diversity in your next international business meeting.

Meeting Etiquette and Mannerisms

In highly diverse international companies, one can find participants in a meeting from the four corners of the globe. Each will have their own cultural etiquettes, gestures, mannerisms and ways of expression. Shouting, throwing hands around and even storming out of meetings are all possibilities. In such a company it may be advisable to provide inter-cultural awareness training to staff to minimise misunderstandings. Where differences are not as acute it may be up to you as the chair to understand how certain etiquettes, gestures and general meeting room tactics may be perceived and how you can minimise any adverse impact.

Expectations of Meetings

Prior to the meeting make it clear what the purpose of the meeting will be. What is the goal of the meeting? Why are you asking each attendant? What do expect from them? Contact the participants and discuss the meeting and what you require of each person. If ready, send them the agenda. If it is a brainstorming meeting then maybe ask each participant to bring at least three suggestions with them. If it is a meeting bringing together different areas within a company, let each attendant know what people would like to hear about from them. Once a framework is in place people will know where they fit into the picture.

Take a Relaxed Approach to Meetings

Many people find business meetings daunting. This may be a combination of stage fright, sitting in front of the boss and feeling inferior to colleagues. This will lead to anxiety, tension, nervousness and general discomfort. Try introducing subtle differences to a meeting to put people at ease. Ice breakers offer a good tension release at the beginning of a meeting. Warm ups offer a similar benefit. Try using an alternative setting

instead of the meeting room. Consider changes in the lighting or ambience.



Group Sizes in Meetings

In short, small groups will work more effectively in meetings. Smaller groups offer increased security and allow for greater participation. In international business meetings, using smaller groups can be used in two ways.

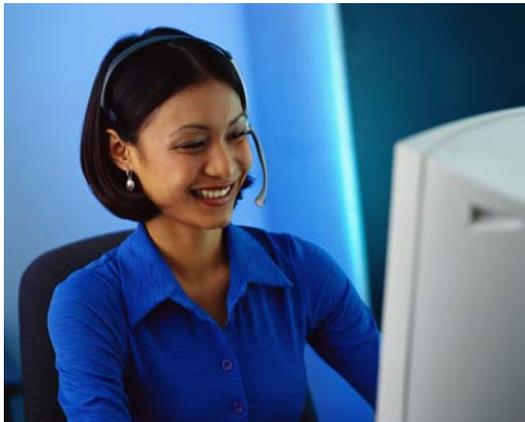
First, prior to a large international business meeting identify who will be coming and what they can contribute. Will the meeting cover different topics? Will it require input from different business areas? If you are organised enough you can initiate some smaller meetings where you group participants who are comfortable with one another or who share expertise in the same area. Ask the groups to take their conclusions to the next, larger, meeting. Participants there will now feel comfortable with their contributions and ideas.

Second, if the company culture allows, break your meeting up into smaller groups where feedback and open discussion may flow more easily. Then ask a delegated head of each group to summarise their findings. This may allow those who would not normally speak out in front of larger groups to get their views across.

Multi-Cultural Meetings

A major mistake made when dealing with diverse cultures in one meeting room is to suggest that those of similar backgrounds work, group or be seated together. Rather than allow for greater

fluency in the meeting this will have the opposite affect. Once cosy in their cultural groups, participants will slip into their cultural patterns. It is vital you mix up your meeting. The additional benefit to this approach is that it allows for cross cultural interpersonal relationships to develop, strengthening staff bonds.



Alternative Communication Methods in Meetings

Most international meetings take on a basic format and structure whereby an agenda is set and attendants contribute to the topic of discussion orally. If you have participants who potentially will be very quiet and non-participatory then consider some alternative methods of communication.

For example, prior to the meeting, e-mail members of staff some questions regarding the forthcoming topics. Give them open-ended questions as to their opinions. Ask them to e-mail back their replies which can then be used to instigate their contribution in the meeting.

If you know some participants are uncomfortable speaking, then why not let them write? Either use a white board or offer to take suggestions and opinions on paper?

Always Confirm Meanings in Meetings

Different cultural assumptions as to the meaning of a word, phrase, symbol, picture or agreement

can cause confusion before and after a meeting. When approaching a topic or after consensus has been agreed upon a subject always confirm that the general meaning has been agreed upon and understood. Where potential problems may exist as to interpretation always simplify meanings. If the meeting will deal with complex language or concepts consider forming a consensus on the meaning all participants will be comfortable with, then circulating them in advance of the meeting for review.

At the end of a meeting, summarise and capture the main agreements and disagreements. Ensure everyone is happy with them.

International business meetings require great planning, organisation and consideration if they are to succeed in offering effective outcomes. Always consider the cultural variants you will be dealing with and think of ways to overcome potential problems. The above mentioned tips are merely basic pointers that will hopefully help you start to think about how culture impacts international meetings. ✧

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Following years of travelling, studying and working in the Middle East and Islamic world, Neil successfully completed a Masters at SOAS University, London in Middle Eastern Studies. Using his experiences in academia, translation, interpretation, teaching, lecturing and cross cultural training he established Kwintessential. Kwintessential was born out of the idea that the current world climate is in desperate need of cross cultural dialogue and aims to promote inter-cultural communication within communities, businesses and organizations. Visit Neil & Kwintessential at www.kwintessential.co.uk.

Email npayne@kwintessential.co.uk with reprinting requests.