

The Misunderstood American: How the World Misreads US Business Behavior

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A big warm smile, a firm handshake, a friendly pat on the shoulder, immediate use of first names – and even automatically shortening other's names (Patrick = Pat), the use of humor and small talk: these are the typical “good guy” signals and behavior most US Americans successfully employ when doing business *inside* the USA. This is how they build, strengthen and maintain trust and relationships. Yet what works for 350 million Americans at home can be quite baffling, extremely confusing or even offensive to the rest of the world's more than seven billion inhabitants. US American startups and established companies have to rethink and develop “beyond the USA” mindsets and strategies to make their businesses prosper globally.

Let's take a closer look at that big bright US American smile. In many cultures, people don't smile at strangers and it is rare to see many – or any – smiles on faces as you walk down the street. In Eastern Europe, for instance, a person who smiles at strangers will be seen as a conman, a lunatic or a moron – or a combination of all three. Who would want to do business with this bizarre and unfathomable creature?

And that handshake, that touch on the shoulder? From Asia to Northern Europe to conservative Muslim countries many don't appreciate close body contact, which can be a particular fauxpas as regards females in conservative Islamic societies. Some Asians might cringe because of the US American vice-like grip or feel uncomfortable with shaking hands altogether. Conversely, American business people are often confused by two Middle Eastern habits: the “limp fish” handshake or the habit of extended hand-holding among close male associates or friends.

Language choice and expressiveness are additional sources of misunderstandings. US Americans exuberant exaggeration and enthusiasm for virtually every suggestion or new idea — “Great! Fantastic! Awesome! The best idea ever!” — is seen, for example, in Germany and other central and northern European cultures as insincere or even “fake.” In cultures where business is conducted in a fact-oriented, unemotional language, this style is so unthinkable that it is sometimes even misinterpreted as irony. Imagine how baffled some American business people are when their well-meaning attempts to inject inspiration and “fun” in meetings actually produces aversion and suspicion? Some Americans never quite figure out why their deal went dead.

Moreover, US Americans, like most Anglo-Saxons, tend to use humor in almost every business situation, from sales presentations to discussing budget overruns. To the dismay of many of their foreign business partners who feel that making jokes during “serious” business transactions is unprofessional, disrespectful and insincere. In reality, the US American deploys humor as a part of their eternal optimism, the idea that “yes, today was rough, but tomorrow will be better.” Humor is used as a tool to lighten the atmosphere, to encourage innovative brainstorming and to promote positive energy.

But there are even more surprising incompatibilities, which might turn good intentions into bad business abroad. For instance, the US American penchant for spontaneity, quick decision-making and rapid alteration of business plans — all based on the cultural and historical experience of the settlers who daily faced dramatic and rapidly changing conditions and had to swiftly adapt to them — appears to most Asian and other long-term planning business cultures as too fast, too risky, too unreliable and too scary: this can destroy confidence and trust in foreign business partners who feel their US American associates don't have a coherent or well thought out

business plan.

Another source of confusion is the American habit of calling everybody their “friend.” One US manager whom we coach told us about his “good friend in Belgium.” But, he continued, “I can’t remember his name, don’t know where exactly he lives and I’ve forgotten where he works.” For most of the world’s cultures, the word “friend” is reserved for a highly select group of individuals – two to three at most. Interestingly, the same is *exactly* true for US Americans who normally label their closest friends as “my best friends” – a subtlety lost on most non-US Americans.

A revolutionary nation of diverse immigrants, natives, outcasts, pioneers, explorers, exploiters and adventurers, intimately embodying diversity and inclusion, US Americans often assume that “everybody” wants to be an American, that the USA is ‘the greatest place on earth,’ thereby often blithely and quite unintentionally disregarding other culture’s uniqueness, strengths and refreshingly different perspectives. Undoubtedly, many do desire this, and the USA is, along with Scandinavia, arguably one of the best places for a woman to fulfill her personal and professional dreams. But still, people from other cultures and historical experiences want their own cultural and historical stories acknowledged and accepted.

US Americans, in turn, want their smiles to be returned, their “How ya doin’ today?” answered with a “Great!”, their “fake” invitations (“Visit me anytime!” “Let’s do lunch!”) to be accepted with warmth and massive enthusiasm (“Oh yes, fabulous idea!” “Here’s my phone number!”) And if it is not returned exactly as the US American expects it to be – in body language, voice, word choice, enthusiasm level – they will feel deeply offended, hurt, rejected or “unloved.”

And when this happens in the USA, the knives and guns come out to create a level and scope of “irrational” emotional violence which is profoundly perplexing and shocking to almost every other culture around the globe. This lies deep within the American soul, and is based on their historically unique necessity to build fast trust between strangers who had to work together and immediately determine friend from foe in order to survive and succeed.

Added to this complex yet seemingly “simple” mix is US American exceptionalism and individualism, which proclaims: “Hey! Here I am! Accept me as I am! I can be anything I want to be!” This mindset and behavior is utterly foreign to great swaths of the world’s cultures from India to Asia to Northern Europe where it is read – or misread – as too boastful, too “me”-oriented and too disrespectful of traditional notions of modesty and group harmony.

The USA is one of the world’s mightiest and most innovative economic powers, and has a robust and vital socio-political presence. Non-US Americans err when they assume that their US American business partners are superficial, untrustworthy or “easy to understand.” Concomitantly, to boost international business and revenue, US Americans have to move towards their foreign partners and let go of their USA-centric attitudes. Ambitious US businesses – particularly the IT kingdoms of Silicon Valley – could immensely enhance their global reach and profitability by increasing their understanding of how the rest of the world builds trust, maintains relationships, communicates, sets deadlines and shows respect. On the other hand, non-US companies need to understand and acknowledge the uniqueness of the US American mindset, and to embrace its many attractions and benefits while maintaining and promoting their own historical and cultural heritages.

There is a tension and a promise within this dynamic exchange between the world and the USA. If well-handled, well-understood and well-managed, this confabulation could benefit billions of people in a vast international vision of potentially peaceful prosperity. The key lies in cross-cultural understanding based on tolerance, meaningful communication and the richness and rewards of diversity and inclusion.