

Ten Strategies for Success Abroad

by Kate Berardo

Working across cultures requires a diverse skill set and a different approach from business in general. When bridging cultures both similar and foreign to your own, certain strategies are crucial to international business success. Here are ten strategies for interacting with people from different cultures.

1 Learn about the business beforehand.

This general business strategy becomes increasingly important when dealing with businesses across cultures. Get on their website, check out their promotional material. Get a feel for the atmosphere, attitude, and angle that the business has. Many cultural factors are passed down from the societal level to businesses. However, each organization *will* have its own culture, personality, and way of doing things.

2 Observe.

Because your mind is processing a lot of information in new environments, your observation skills when working across cultures may be flooded or unfocused. Keep your observation skills engaged and alert to elements that will help you do business. Notice how people act, dress, and treat each other. Especially if you come from a culture that emphasizes verbal communication, make a point of looking for messages that are conveyed without being said. Being able to read a situation will greatly improve your ability to have a successful meeting.

3 Ask questions.

Many people don't want to reveal how little they know about other cultures, so they

don't ask questions. Ultimately, they limit their ability to work in other cultures. Questions show you are interested in your colleague's culture. This interest and consideration helps build your relationship, which is especially important if your culture has a reputation for trying to culturally dominate others (e.g. the U.S.). Demonstrate that you are working to create synergy between your cultures with questions. In doing so, you create room for the mistakes you may make; people are more willing to look past cultural blunders if they know you are trying to learn about the culture you are working with.

4 Stay aware of yourself.

Some people feel like they have somewhat of an out-of-body experience when in cross-cultural situations because they are focused on everything new outside of themselves. There can be so much going on around you that you forget to focus on yourself as well. Take advantage of down time (and make time for it) so you can get in touch with your body and feelings. What's your gut feeling? Where is it coming from? This process can help you feel more grounded and secure in your experience abroad.

5 Allow for more time.

Working across cultures takes more time. Communication may be slowed and logistics may be different. You may be working with a culture with a different concept of time altogether. Expect most things to take longer than they would when dealing with a business from your same culture or country. Also give yourself more time to process all the information before making decisions.

6 Look for individual differences.

Overviews of cultures are meant to be guidelines only. Individuals may have values and behaviors that vary greatly from those of their native culture. Many people

make the mistake of trying to fit people they are working with into cultural molds, when often they don't fit. People's values and behaviors are influenced in part by their culture, but also by their background, experiences, and personality. Be careful not to attribute too much of what you observe to a cultural difference.

7 Find the humor.

Humor heals and helps you through difficult situations. Travel can be stressful, as can new environments and change in general. This stress can limit both your flexibility and your ability to handle cross-cultural situations. Combat stress with humor. Be able to step away (at least mentally) from situations and find the humor in them.

8 Learn to tolerate uncertainty.

This is an essential skill, and one that can be extremely difficult for people from some cultures where directness and exactness are valued (e.g. Germany, the US). There will be a great deal of unknowns when doing business across cultures. Definitive, concrete answers may not always be given, especially if you are working with a culture with a high tolerance for uncertainty. Focus on what you *can* determine and try to let go of minor details that are unclear. (Similarly, if you come from a culture that doesn't place a high value on exactness and are working with someone from a culture that does, try to provide clarification and details when possible.)

9 Go early.

If your meeting is face-to-face and you'll be traveling abroad, go a few days before your scheduled meeting. Give yourself time to adjust; you will have to deal with physical adjustments (jet lag, different foods) as well as a number of cultural adjustments as well. These changes can be overwhelming and should be spread out to make them manageable. Give yourself time to adjust physically and then your

mind will be better able to make cultural adjustments that are essential for success.

10 Build your intercultural skills.

When working with people from different cultures, you need a solid understanding of the norms of that culture. You also need communication skills and business strategies that can be applied across cultures. The items listed above reflect some of the necessary skills for intercultural work in general. However, individuals need to further their intercultural competence based on their own situations and needs.

To determine what skills you need to develop, reflect on past intercultural experiences (for people with limited experience abroad, think of experiences working and interacting with people and groups different from you). When do you become uncomfortable, rigid, or shut down? What mistakes have you made in the past? Commit yourself to continually developing the skills that will help you in similar situations in the future.

View your experiences with different cultures as a trajectory, rather than a string of individual experiences. Link the different experiences you have and you can link the personal development and learning that comes with them. ✧

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