

About the Author/MIA DOUCET

Mia Doucet, author of the award-winning book, *China In Motion*, facilitates executive retreats with companies that want to increase revenues in the Asia Pacific. A major automotive client describes Mia as an “innovative strategist, whose genius is her ability to combine her vision, research, and insights to spark money-making ideas.” Sign up for your free “Asia Minute” at: <http://www.asiaminute.com>.

China In Motion is available at Chapters, Barnes & Noble, online and at <http://www.chinainmotion.com>.



International Business? You Need Interpersonal Flexibility

Too often, companies select a top performer to represent them in Asia, without considering the personal qualities that make for success in the East. Our top performers in the West (particularly top sales performers) are often assertive, independent, fast-paced, no-nonsense, straight-shooting, get-me-to-the-decision-maker types. They have the strong handshake and direct eye contact and ability to get things done that we so value. They're at their best when solving problems creatively.

Yet all of these qualities have to be toned down or suppressed when working with Asian customers, suppliers and local staff because they often prove counterproductive. Each of them triggers passive resistance.

Other qualities have to be developed in order not to miss the big opportunities. (If you have read my previous articles in this magazine, you know that, for all sorts of reasons, Asians will not risk the relationship through telling you the truth about a situation. You just won't get the desired results. And you will never know that you missed out on better opportunities. That's just one of the things that makes the work that much more challenging.)

One of those qualities is interpersonal flexibility.

To bridge the gap between the cultures and connect with people whose ways differ from our own, we need to be willing to adapt our personal style.

This may not be as easy as it sounds. For years, we have studied “social styles” models in order to adapt our personality to work in teams. (The Myers-Briggs type indicator comes to mind.) But the disparity in styles between Easterners and Westerners is so much greater than any we encounter within our own culture.

How will you adapt your style to the following three facts?

1. **Asians are more reserved and harder to get to know.** It can take years. Even then, to what extent can you really be trusted as a foreigner? Asians perceive Westerners as aggressive, impatient and impulsive. This can be used against you if you are not

aware of, and able to adapt, your outward behaviors: how fast you walk; how loud and fast you talk; your display of emotions.

2. **Asians' use of time is less structured.** In the West, we think of time as linear. In the East, time is circular and relative and connected to past history. So Asians don't have the same sense of urgency. Better to make the right decision than rush things along. Attempting to force your sense of urgency on your Asian clients will only result in passive resistance.

3. **Asians care deeply about how others see them.** Their interpersonal behavior exists to protect and give face while maintaining surface harmony. Their ways of behaving bear no relationship to how they really feel about the other person.

So what can you do about it?

Monitor your assertiveness.. In Western culture, the face and body contribute a lot of information to a conversation. You can communicate instantly simply by smiling, frowning, laughing out loud, even pounding your fist on the table. But that will hurt you in the Asian business context. You need to become less transparent, not so easy to read.

Put a muzzle on it. Keep your emotions in check. Suppress the facial animation. Check your hand and body gestures. Stay composed and rein in the enthusiasm. Relax the handshake, tone down the eye contact and stand back. Speak slowly and quietly. Move slowly and deliberately.

Change how you deliver information. Slow down. Ask questions instead of making statements. Never come right to the point. Start with background information, describe each point of decision, then end with your recommendation. (Do not start with your conclusion and work backward. That will work against you.)

Remove any hint of challenge or confrontation. Never interrupt. Refrain from displaying or forcing your ideas on others. Keep your (strong) opinions to yourself. Never challenge or dispute with any member of your team – and certainly not with anyone who has greater authority.

Protect personal dignity. Seek to maintain surface harmony by smoothing over misunderstandings. Accept responsibility for communication breakdowns.

Drop the sense of urgency. Pause before responding. Under-react rather than overreact. Never show exasperation. Do not even sigh in frustration. Finally, during business hours, skip the small talk, personal stories and humor altogether.

This all requires most Westerners to act in ways that feel unnatural. For some of us, it's exhausting to keep ourselves on such a tight leash.

Here are two ways to compensate and release the tension before it gets to you.

Play It Like Chess

1. You're a novice. Like the game of chess to anyone who doesn't know the rules, a high-context culture appears perplexing and even chaotic at first. Adapt the attitude of a learner. You don't know what you don't know yet. But once you've learned the rules and gained a little experience, patterns will start to emerge.

2. There are classic patterns to the game. In brief, they are trust, face, surface harmony and *guanxi*. With awareness of the game, you can begin to observe how things flow and evolve, how the advantage appears to shift from side to side. As you get good at the game, you will see how to use the patterns to your advantage.

3. Winning the game means knowing that there are many ways to reach your goal. Think several moves

ahead. Constantly re-adjust your strategy in response to the changing information. Keep looking at the big picture and keep an open mind.

Schedule Down Time

Adapting our interpersonal style, suppressing daytime humor, staying detached, and floating in a sea of ambiguity does not come naturally to most of us. It can wear a person down. Release your tension by taking care of yourself in Asia. Remember, your Asian hosts will have packed a full day of activities for you. Plan in advance and use your go-between to schedule time out.

Fortunately, hotels in the commercial areas of the Pacific Rim make that easy to do. They are beautifully appointed and a refuge for the weary traveler. Have a bath or shower after work, before heading off to dinner. Bring your swimming and exercise gear to take advantage of the superb facilities. (There is sometimes an extra fee to use club facilities, which are often open to the local public by membership.) Enjoy a whirlpool, sauna, steam bath or massage. Go to the lounge and enjoy a glass of beer or wine, and relax to the easy-listening music of a piano bar or live band.

Think about making use of these strategies and you will begin to feel the financial power of effective cross-cultural dialogue. ◉