

## management

# are your people firefighters?

**If they are, it's probably wise to alter strategy when dealing with the Asian business community.**

by Mia Doucet

**It happened again** just this morning. I was working at my desk when the phone rang. It was a potential client, calling on a referral: "We're making a presentation to Toyota tomorrow; what do we need to know?" (Ahem, how long ago was this meeting booked? And how much is this potential relationship worth?)

My heart went out to them, because I knew they had no idea what they were in for. Without advance preparation, they didn't stand a chance. There would be no new business here.

How do I get the message across that Westerners' lack of strategy works against us with Asian customers and suppliers?

In my work in training engineering teams, I notice a marked reluctance to take the time to plan ahead for client meetings. Even when millions of dollars are at stake, my new clients think they can wing it. Nothing is further from the truth.

Most of my clients are firefighters. They love the challenge. They think that's their job. In fact, they're so good at what they do that if there isn't a fire somewhere, they're apt to feel that they're not earning their keep.

It reminds me of a person I worked with in my second corporate job with a privately owned manufacturing firm. The general manager was the type of person who was at his best solving crises. That was his highest skill. After I had worked there for a while, I began to see that not only was he a good crisis manager, he was good at causing the

crisis in the first place. I think it made him feel valued, alive, and in demand.  
Like many of my clients.

### **Firefighting Foibles**

We're quick on our feet, good at winging it, quick at making tactical decisions on the spot. A problem erupts and we move right in. The problem is that, in practice, all these strengths are at odds with Asian ways of doing business, for various reasons.

Informal meetings do three things: They break Asian taboos on business meeting protocol; they put us at a disadvantage because Asians are strategic thinkers, focused on the long term; they ignore the fact that Asians do not tolerate mistakes for all sorts of cultural reasons.

In the West, we call informal meetings to thrash out ideas, to brainstorm, to solve a problem. In the East, informality and lack of preparation mean we're not taking the business seriously. It signals disrespect for Asians' time, and that's a serious insult.

I believe that this is one reason so many Western firms find it difficult to make headway with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean firms.

Firefighters have to deal only with the situation at hand. They do not need a long-term plan of action. It's day-to-day survival.

During an executive retreat with a Tier 1 automotive client a few months ago, participants told me about their first meeting with an Asian original equipment manufacturer. The folks at Toyota had my client's entire history and critical information in front of them—neatly summarized on one page. They had already drawn up a master plan of action. "It blew us away because we had never seen this sort of preparation before," one Westerner said.

### **A Low Tolerance for Errors**

Asians don't have the mentality that if something goes sideways in a meeting, they'll fix it on the spot. They

don't like to make mistakes in the first place. Unlike us, they're taught to avoid mistakes at all cost. (Toyota's "obsession with improvement" is another topic altogether.) They are afraid of making mistakes because that causes loss of face. So they look to avoid fires. Moreover, the person who makes a mistake is not to be trusted. And mistakes are more likely to happen when we work without a blueprint.

So if your technical people feel most alive and valued when they solve a crisis, I have to ask you this: Have you ever stopped to think how much it's costing you with your Asian customers and suppliers?

Planning allows us to approach any meeting or negotiation from a position of strength. It lets us set the direction of the meeting. If we are not well prepared, the other side will sense our lack of preparation and this will weaken us. Since every conversation with Asians has an impact on our company's history, any lack of preparation will diminish our ability to negotiate effectively in the future.

We can never plan too much for a meeting with our Asian colleagues. It is probably safe to say that we can never outflank them in strategy.

One of the best ways for us to stand out from the competition is to come to meetings prepared to do business the Asian way. There are five steps to follow: 1. Plan ahead with the long term in mind. 2. Spend time on the details. 3. Come prepared to discuss potential problems. 4. Project potential risks into the future. 5. Build consensus with others on your team prior to the formal meeting to present a common front.

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