

Chinese Cultural Savvy

By Huiping Iler

A director of human resources from an Ottawa company called one day in distress. She was concerned and confused as to why the sympathy flowers she sent for a Chinese employee were rejected at the employee's door. The parent of the Chinese employee who lived in Toronto had passed away. The director was unable to send the flowers to the funeral home in time. So instead, she ordered the flowers to be sent to the employee's home.

Little did she know that China is a nation with many superstitions. In Chinese culture, those flowers are associated with death and viewed as bad omen should they been accepted. They would have been lovely and much appreciated at the funeral home. However, to accept such flowers into one's house would bring the association of death into that home.

Another important cultural reality to understand is that in many Asian countries, especially China, the "we" always comes before the "I." In the cultural awareness workshops I teach worldwide, I illustrate how interests of the nation, company or family as a group always come before those of an individual. Decisions can be made without individual's consent if they are perceived to be for the collective good.

For example, a few years ago, a Chinese automotive supplier changed an American customer's product without asking permission. The customer was furious, but the supplier did not understand why. "Not without my permission" is an important phrase in Western cultures, because it shows respect for individual authority and individual choice. But in China, it is much more common for supervisors and others to make decisions that affect others without consulting anyone else, because they believe they are acting in the best interests of the group.

Examples like above illustrate how lack of understanding between the mainstream North American culture and Chinese culture can lead to relationship rift in the workplace. It can also have a direct impact on productivity and career advancement of employees.

Today, China is a major source of immigrants and Chinese make up one of the largest group of workers in both the United States and Canada. To tap into their talent and maximize their capabilities in the workplace has become imperative for companies. But without understanding their culture and thus consequently their behavior, it is impossible to truly motivate and get the best out of a Chinese workforce.

When a management position opened up at a mid-sized Canadian company, a call for applications was sent through the internal e-mail system. Senior management had hoped that a Chinese employee with the perfect experience and background would apply for the position. Ultimately, however Canadian employees without management experience applied, but the more qualified Chinese employee with prior management background did not.

The senior manager set out to find out the reason behind all of this and he learned that employees of different cultural backgrounds perceive such opportunities through their own socio-cultural filter.

In this instance, the Chinese employee was suspicious of the authenticity of such a job opening. He believed that if company principals really had wanted him to apply, they would have approached him directly. Had he perceived the job opening as legitimate, he would have embraced the opportunity to put his management skills to use.

Also, he believed that if he were to jump at the chance, his co-workers might think he is too ambitious. He feared that pursuing the new opportunity might jeopardize his excellent relationship with his colleagues. The would-be candidate determined that applying for a different position could negatively affect the security of his current position, as his superior and co-workers might feel that he wanted to "jump ship."

The Chinese employee also weighed the chances of failing to earn the job after completing the application process. If senior management already had another internal candidate in mind, the Chinese employee might feel humiliated to apply and fail. It is important not to "Lose face" in Chinese culture. The would-be candidate determined that the risk in applying for the job was simply too great for the reward.

Many of the factors that went into the Chinese employee's decision process were culturally biased, such as fear of losing face and valuing the harmony with co-workers and superior over his own career advancement. If an employer is unaware of such cultural factors, he would not be in a position to encourage his Chinese employees and thus be unable to maximize their talent.

The urgency of understanding Chinese culture has never been more obvious. As China rises as the world's new economic superpower, understanding of the Chinese psyche becomes invaluable in negotiations of contracts, management of supplier relations and many other business situations. China is also one of the largest sources of immigrants for both the United States and Canada. Understanding Chinese employees allows employers to maximize the potential of their workforce to a huge competitive advantage.

About the author:

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