

Intercultural Communication Briefing Paper

**Title: When in Beijing or Dubai
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2. Summary

The purpose of this report is to offer advice to the Head of Marketing from TBG Tours (an American) in preparation for his forthcoming business development trip to China and Dubai. Relevant theoretical models of cultural awareness were used to produce this briefing paper which will highlight the key challenges of intercultural communication in these countries. It will also look at the potential impacts these differences could have on the outcome of the meeting and offer strategic recommendations on how these challenges could be overcome.

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1. Introduction

This report will highlight some of the key challenges of intercultural communication for a business meeting that is being conducted by an American in China and Dubai. It recognises the cultural differences that exist between these countries and the importance of being respectful and sensitive towards each other in establishing a good business relationship. Hofstede's theory on cultural dimensions has been applied in this report to illustrate these differences as he believed that the values in the workplace are largely influenced by culture. In contrast, Halls theory on cultural concepts is also mentioned in this report for an alternative viewpoint.

2. Preparing for an International Business Trip

2.1 Cultural Awareness

Culture can be complex and there have been many attempts to define it. Hofstede (2010) described it as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group of people from others”. Similarly, Moran (2014) defined it as “giving people a sense of who they are, of belonging, how they should behave and what they should be doing”. It is important to realise that what is considered normal behaviour in one country could be considered offensive in another. Therefore, in business, cultural awareness is vital when visiting another country if the meeting is to have a successful outcome.

2.2 Culture Shock

Callahan (2010) described culture shock as “a feeling of disorientation or discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of the environment”. Americans are frequently shocked by the foreign behaviours and customs of other countries. Therefore, being familiar with the cultural diversity and the various social, cultural and economic differences of a country (Sweetman, 2012) is vital in avoiding any misunderstandings.

2.3 Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions has been used by many companies around the world for distinguishing one culture from another. It has been used in this report to highlight the cultural differences between China, Dubai and America (Fig1) and to give an insight as to how culture can affect international business. Hofstede’s (2010) initial studies identified four key dimensions.

Power Distance indicates power equality within a society. It is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede Insights, 2018). In business, this means that subordinate's expect to be consulted and told what to do by their boss. These ideals and fears have evolved from personal previous experiences from within the family and at school (Hofstede, 1994).

Individualism (vs. Collectivism) is the emphasis that is placed on an individual only being concerned for themselves in the workplace. On the other hand, collectivism is more about team work where members look out for each other.

Masculinity (vs. Feministic) a masculine society is driven and competitive whereas a feminine society is more caring and co-operative. In a feminine workplace, assertiveness is ridiculed, people usually undersell themselves and the focus is more on quality of life. In a masculine workplace, people are usually more assertive, very self-confident and are more career focused (Hofstede, 1994).

Uncertainty Avoidance is the extent to which a culture feels uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede Insights, 2018). In a weak workplace culture, there is a dislike of rules and things are a lot less formal whereas a strong workplace culture prefers formality and rules (Hofstede, 1994).

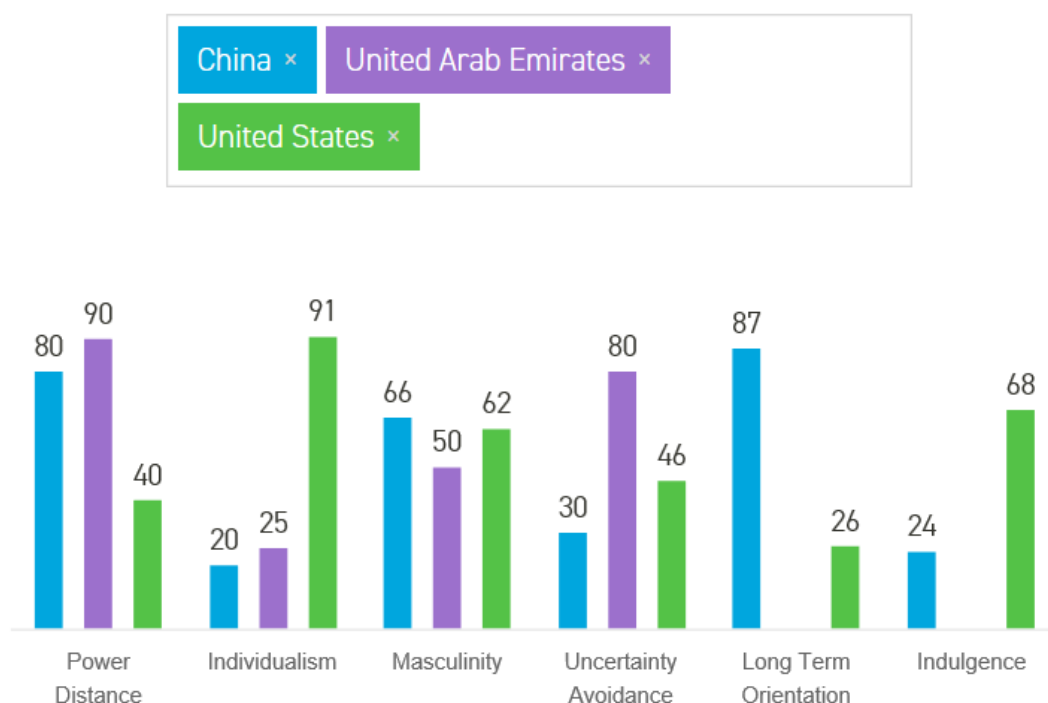


Fig1

3. Cultural Differences in China, The Middle East & the US

3.1 Power Distance

Hofstede's cultural dimension model shows China with a score of 80 which indicates that inequalities amongst people are acceptable (Hofstede Insights, 2018) and is quite normal in Chinese corporate culture. Sweetman (2012) goes on to say that in the workplace, being a boss means power, authority and respect.

Similarly, The United Arab Emirates results also revealed that inequalities amongst the middle eastern culture is also quite acceptable. Organisations tend to be more centralised and hierarchies in the workplace are of great importance. (Hofstede, 2010).

The United States, however, ranked quite low in comparison to China and the United Arab Emirates which means that superiors and subordinates from the US consider each other to be equals.

These results need to be taken into consideration for the forthcoming business development meeting. Issues could arise, if the Chinese were to act more superior throughout the meeting which could then lead to a potential power struggle (Battaglia, 2014). The Chinese like to avoid conflict as there could be a loss of respect and reputation and therefore, building trust and good communication skills is vital at this stage (Moran, 2014) if the meeting is to have a favourable outcome.

3.2 Individualism vs Collectivism

China is highly collectivist (Fig1) which means that people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily themselves and place a strong emphasis on building relationships and trust. However, Moran et al (2014) argues that the Chinese no longer consider themselves a collectivist nation. With this in mind, it highlights the importance of avoiding stereotyping as this type of inaccuracy could damage a good business relationship (Horakova, 2007).

The United Arab Emirates, is also a collectivist country and like the Chinese, this group is committed to a close long-term relationship where loyalty is paramount. The bond within the group is strong where everyone is responsible for fellow members.

The United States resulted in being a highly individualist country. This means that in business, Americans are used to interacting with people and are happy to approach those they do not know.

As an individualist country meeting with two collectivist countries, business negotiations for the upcoming meeting could be strained. It is important to realise that collectivists will wait for the whole group to make a decision so this could take time. Therefore, trying to rush a Chinese or Middle Eastern person through the decision making progress could be detrimental to the business deal

3.3 Masculinity vs Feministic Culture

According to Powel (2015), China is a highly masculine society. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) explains this culture is driven by competition, achievement and success.

On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates is neither masculine or feminine with a median score of 50 (Hofstede Insights, 2018).

Like China, the United States is a masculine society (Rashidi, 2016). Moran (2014) further explains that emphasis and recognition are placed on being the best.

Therefore, during the forthcoming business meeting, it is important to remember that when two masculine cultures are negotiating, the meeting could become quite competitive which could result in a lost business deal. Being mindful of this is important throughout the negotiations.

3.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

Chinas low score indicates that the Chinese are comfortable with ambiguity (Hofstede Insights, 2018). According to Andrew (2016) Chinese managers have very different perspectives and find risk taking much less tolerable and are often reluctant to make a decision if there is uncertainty.

United Arab Emirates high score indicates they are intolerant of unorthodox behaviours and ideas and like to maintain rules. In the workplace, there is a strong work ethic and punctuality is important (Hofstede Insights, 2018).

The United States scored 46 in this area. In business, Americans are accepting of new ideas, innovative products and are willing to try something new. At the same time, Americans are tolerant of ideas and opinions and encourage freedom of expression (Hofstede Insight, 2018).

While the American business ethos is characterised by a spirit of adventure, the Chinese approach to this cultural dimension can deprive them of significant business opportunities (Andrew, 2016)

4. International Business Practice

4.1 Introductions

China and Dubai are very similar where there is a strong emphasis on time keeping. With this in mind, it is very important to arrive to the meeting on time. It is also important to note that the Chinese dislike touching and a firm handshake is not normal for them. Instead, a bow would be more appropriate when meeting for the first time (Moran, 2014).

4.2 Communication

When doing business, communication is key. English is the universal business language of many international companies. But how you convey your message is considered more important (Hult Blog, 2018). According to Hall (1989) low and high context cultures differ in the way messages are conveyed. The Chinese tend to place more emphasis on body language which could be harder for someone to interpret and could potentially lead to misunderstandings (Hornik and Le Pair, 2017).

4.3 Workplace Etiquette

Although American culture is used to calling people by their first name, the Chinese tend to be more formal and will address people using their title and surname. (Hult Blog, 2018).

Also, Hult's Blog (2018) says that punctuality can also differ between cultures in an international business environment and different ideas can often lead to a misunderstanding or a negative cultural perceptions.

Differences in attitude are common in the workplace. For example, the Chinese consider working long hours as a sign of commitment and achievement whereas a business colleague from Dubai, may see it as a lack of efficiency or deprioritizing of essential family and personal time.

4.4 Organisational Hierarchy

This concept is very important in Middle eastern cultures and Dubai is a country that traditionally values social hierarchy, relative status and respect for seniority in the workplace. In this culture, hierarchy helps to define roles and responsibilities within an organisation. Therefore, a doing business in this country means that a manager at a senior level would command respect and expect a certain level of formality compared to their junior counterparts. Therefore, it is important to remember this during the forthcoming business meeting.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that having a good cultural understanding of China and Dubai is vital if the business meeting is to be a success. In a world that is becoming more globalised, it is vitally important that the business visitor has the ability to adjust to the cultural differences of the countries being visited. Being fully aware and prepared before the business trip commences, could prove beneficial to the outcome of the meeting.

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