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Leveraging Cultural Differences: The Chinese Example

Mia Doucet, founder and CEO of Asia Mastery, says American companies have to be willing to modify their behavior when operating in China.

"We have been so successful doing business our way that we're not as aware as we should be that other cultures have a way of doing business that has served them well for millennia," Doucet, an international training consultant who specializes in Asia, told BNA. "When we choose to adapt our behavior out of respect for cultural differences, we start the process of building the deep human connection that Asians crave. That emphasis on relationship will build trust and assure loyalty to your organization long into the future."

The Chinese also have a deep need for acknowledgement, she said. "We all need to be acknowledged, but the Chinese crave it," she said. This need governs all business communication, not just negotiations, and includes communications by fax, phone, and e-mail.

The Chinese also do not work well in teams because they have a profound respect for hierarchy and will wait for someone else to make decisions, Doucet said.

Challenging superiors or making mistakes can lead to loss of face,

which is critically important in Chinese culture. If you force Chinese colleagues into situations where they experience loss of face, "they can't ever trust you in the future," Doucet said, and once you've lost their trust, a Chinese workforce will retreat to passive resistance.

"No one will challenge you directly, because that would be rude," Doucet said. "They will go quiet, submissive, and outwardly non-resistant when you place them in an impossible position. This is the underlying cause of costly delays and production errors."

Chinese employees need training to make them more comfortable taking risks and to learn that "it's OK to look smarter than your boss," she said.

But any insensitivity in trying to change a five-thousand-year-old culture will backfire, she warned.

"Turnover in China is huge," she said. "They will leave for pennies." And they will jump ship without hesitation if "they never feel at home and we never respect their culture."

The key change American managers must make is to slow down and build the critical personal relationship with Chinese employees. "Take a personal interest, ask about their families, spend time with them

outside of work," Doucet advised. "That's when you'll see the humor. That's when you can build the trust so they'll feel safer in taking risks."

Doucet advises Western managers in China to:

- Slow down. Make sure that all parties receive the same detailed information. Keep everyone in the loop.

- Avoid brainstorming. Problem solve logically. Allow one person to speak at a time. Defer to the person in authority. Start from the beginning and work through to a solution in a logical, step-by-step fashion.

- Avoid presenting incomplete, fragmented information. Break requests for information into small, discrete segments.

- Prepare for every interaction. Do not present ideas that have not been fully researched, proven, or studied beforehand. Do not risk losing face by appearing unprepared.

- Document in writing and in detail. Make sure your facts are 100 percent accurate in every detail. Mistakes will result in loss of credibility and trust.

"Fortunately, small changes in behavior can have a major impact on results," Doucet said. "The Chinese are highly adaptable, anxious to do business, and willing to overlook minor indiscretions."