Building Cross-Cultural Relationships in a Global Workplace

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As he refreshed his email for what felt like the hundredth time, Partha Shah still couldn't believe what he was seeing: a job offer from one of the Fortune 100 global technology companies he had dreamed about since starting business school. His application had been a longshot — he didn't have the quantitative chops the company was looking for. But Partha did bring many other things to the table, like his marketing internships, a keen sense of strategy and design, and the ability to seamlessly interact across cultures. This last talent came naturally: He had easily made friends with students from nearly every continent, he followed creators from around the world to stay up on global trends, and he leapt at any chance to travel abroad. Given his deep interest in cultures near and far, the part of his new job that he was *least* worried about was the multicultural aspect.

Imagine his surprise, then, when he struggled to bond with his new colleagues, who were nothing like the cosmopolitan peers of his own age whom he had so successfully connected with at school. Even after several weeks of working together, his new coworkers still felt like strangers. Interacting with them felt awkward, unnatural, and forced. For the first time, Partha experienced cultural differences as a barrier. It was confounding, especially since he couldn't pinpoint how or why relationship building seemed so different from what he was used to. Worse, he didn't know what to do about it — and not only did this make his daily work life less pleasant, but he fretted that it could impact his career prospects, too.

The reality of today's global organizations, like the one Partha joined, is that

they simply aren't prioritizing cultural awareness or appreciation of cultural differences to the degree they should. One [survey](#)found that 89% of corporate employees serve on at least one global team, and 62% have colleagues from three or more cultures. These employees need to be able to build effective cross-cultural relationships despite their cultural differences. This will only become more critical as companies continue to globalize and diversify. And it's not just large companies going global. According to [a recent survey,](#) 75% of small and medium-sized businesses are planning to increase their international headcount.

Like Partha, most of us never consider how culture shapes our expectations and assumptions about relationship building. But from our research with over 100 professionals around the world, it's very clear that our cultural upbringing *does* influence how we form and maintain connections with others — often quite significantly. In our new book *Forging Bonds in a Global Workforce*, we identify six core elements of the relationship code, including where relationship building takes place, who can initiate relationships with whom, what kinds of relationships people attempt to form, what types of personal information people share, how people present themselves in the early stages of getting acquainted, and how quickly we expect to establish a working sense of trust and rapport. These elements are at the root of the confusion, misperception, and misattribution that can occur when people attempt to build relationships across cultures.

By paying attention to these six elements, global workers like Partha will gain insight into why things may "feel different" when getting to know their colleagues. They may even discover they have more in common with their colleagues than they initially assumed. In this article, we'll introduce the six core elements of the relationship code: place, power, purpose, privacy, presence, and pacing.

Place

Relationship building flourishes in different places in different cultures. The key is to know which locations are likely to be the most conducive to forging bonds with your colleagues from other cultures so you can make the right moments count. For example, relationship building in Japan — especially with a superior — is typically restricted to events *outside the workplace*, like a visit to a karaoke bar. As a global worker in Japan, it's important to recognize the unique opportunity for relationship building that a karaoke bar might provide, especially if that particular location doesn't carry the same meaning in your own culture. By contrast, relationship building in a Canadian workplace might happen in many places *inside the workplace* — in the breakroom, in the hallway, before or after a meeting, at lunch, during a break from work. In this case, saving your bonding attempts for offsite events might mean your chance never comes. And in other cultures, like India, relationship building may be especially likely at non-work events like local festivals or family celebrations, where you may be invited to a colleague's home. If you don't show up, you might not only insult your co-worker but you might find it difficult to forge that same bond back in the office.

Power

To varying degrees across cultures, power shapes the perceived boundaries of relationship building, particularly around who can have relationships with whom, at what level, and who takes the lead. Imagine that you come from a hierarchical culture, like South Korea, where you were taught to show great respect and deference to elders — in your family, at school, in religious contexts, and then ultimately at the workplace. Now imagine that as a young adult, you work at a startup in the U.S., where building connections with superiors is normal and even expected. You might find yourself in the breakroom between meetings, where people are casually making small talk,

laughing, and joking across seniority levels. It might be hard for you to enter the fray to connect with your boss; it may even feel inappropriate and disrespectful.

Now let's consider the reverse: What if you were raised in a very flat hierarchical culture where rank was downplayed, like Sweden or the Netherlands, and you end up working in China or Malaysia. Now, you likely need to show deference to your boss and patiently wait for signals that a relationship is even an option. These signals may be indirect — like sharing a small personal detail or showing a small gesture of kindness — so you will have to make sure your antenna is up. In global work, paying attention to the power element will give you a better chance of fostering relationships in a way that seems appropriate, effective, and professional.

Purpose

Not all professional relationships serve the same purpose. Some offer clear *instrumental* benefits or strategic rewards, like that of an independent consultant hoping to secure a deal with a key client. Others offer *intrinsic* benefits, like the camaraderie and validation you receive from working together. Professionals in places like Germany may prefer to keep these two purposes separate: You wouldn't necessarily expect to become chummy with your work colleague here, and it could feel like an intrusion or violation to do so. Yet in other cultures, like Brazil, workplace relationships are cherished for their own sake and colleagues often become friends who make a habit of meeting up on the weekends for fun. And in some places, like the U.S., we see a blend: People enjoy building a personal connection, but more to motivate the team, function effectively, and get the job done faster. These notions about purpose are linked to differing interpretations of "professionalism." If we don't pay attention to this, we can easily feel annoyed, disillusioned, confused, or judgmental when a colleague deviates

from what we're expecting.

Privacy

All relationships involve some degree of personal disclosure, but what you reveal and how soon you share it vary tremendously across cultures (and personalities!). A Brazilian interviewee said there's almost no topic she wouldn't discuss with her workmates, and she found it off-putting that people would put up artificial walls around their personal lives while at work. "What's the big deal? We're all just people!" According to her, if she tried to get to know someone a few times and they wouldn't open up, she would likely assume that person was a snob, or anti-social, and would probably give up. Now consider a totally different perspective from a Taiwanese manager, who griped that the default American style of getting-to-know-you questions was far too personal. "They say things like, 'Tell me about yourself,' or ask questions about my background, my family. And I'm thinking, 'Slow down, I just met you! Let's talk about something less personal first.'" It's easy to see how these differences in cultural norms could easily lead two colleagues to completely misjudge each other's approach and even assume that the relationship was hopeless, when the truth is that they just have different norms for what they share and when.

Presence

When you meet someone for the first time, what kind of signals do you send? Are you likely to smile and greet them with an inviting, warm, upbeat, positive tone? Do you put the other person at ease with your casual demeanor and relaxed vibe? Or do you take a restrained approach, perhaps wearing a poker face and focusing on protocol over cheerfulness? That's what we mean by "presence" — the verbal and non-verbal presentation style you send, and expect to receive, during your initial interactions. And just like

our other P's, this one has strong cultural roots, which makes it ripe for misunderstanding.

A good example of a culture clash around presence is a networking event involving American and French professionals. Our French interviewees told us that they try very hard to make a good impression by being polite, dignified, correct, and somewhat reserved at first. They may also try to show their intelligence and competence by discussing something more philosophical, which feels to them like safe professional territory. Yet, in doing so, they may come across as unfriendly and snooty to their American counterparts, who are typically not scanning for erudite discussion but are looking for signs of cheerfulness and agreeability. Meanwhile, the American who is chatting about what they perceive as "everyday topics" like sports and pop culture — all while wearing a big grin and standing in a relaxed manner — can look trivial, immature, and lacking gravitas. These mixed signals can jeopardize a relationship before it even gets started, not because the differences are insurmountable, but because each party's interpretations around their meaning can lead them to think the other person is not worth getting to know.

Pacing

Do you feel comfortable getting acquainted quickly? Or do you prefer taking things slow? Pacing, which is similar to privacy, is relevant to professional relationships across cultures because some cultures (and personalities) are quick to develop an initial working trust and then get down to business right away, while others might be slower to open up. In Germany, for example, it generally takes a while to feel comfortable enough with a new work colleague to share personal information with them. This is exemplified by the fact that Germans often wait for a long time before even using the more familiar form of the pronoun "you" (which is "du") — defaulting instead to the

more formal version ("sie") until the time is right. You just don't typically fast-track personal relationships in Germany as you might in the U.S. or some South American countries. We similarly heard from a Japanese expat interviewee in Jordan that he had come to expect many rounds of tea and sweets as part of the local getting-acquainted dance. To him, the series of introductory conversations was superfluous to the tasks at hand, but because he understood the pacing code, he tried to go with the flow.

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These core elements of building relationships across cultures aren't meant to be a formula that can predict what someone from a given culture will be like, nor are they meant to tell global workers like Partha exactly how to build relationships with colleagues across cultures. Instead, they are meant to help professionals who work with colleagues from different cultures understand their own relationship "code," develop a sense of others' styles, and (crucially) anticipate and identify key gaps and overlaps between the two. With this newfound clarity, the next step is to find ways to bridge those gaps — or at least work around them — so that otherwise promising relationships don't fail to launch. At the end of the day, people will make their own personal determination about the extent to which they will adapt to the other's code, or simply accept the difference. But *understanding* the difference is a critical first step in building the relationship.