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– Outi Orajärvi

CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING paves the way for shared business

Misunderstandings are probably the most common reason why a member of a foreign culture comes across as rude or mean. Lack of understanding may also present an obstacle to international business. When a company based in Oulu was sold to new owners in America, the Finnish management organized cross-cultural training for the personnel with the view of minimizing potential problems.

When Finnish businesspeople tell their American partners that ‘our company does this’ or ‘our company made this decision’, the listener feels that no-one is taking responsibility for the action. Americans use the pronoun “I” in similar situations, which Finns easily interpret as egocentric.

HantroProducts Oy, a video technology company based in Oulu, was sold to the American company On2 Technologies Inc last November. In order to prevent misunderstandings arising from prejudice and different operating cultures, the company commissioned AAC Global to organize a cross-cultural training course for its entire Finnish personnel. The course focused on American culture.

Outi Orajärvi, HR Coordinator for On2 Technologies Finland Oy, says that as soon as the acquisition had been completed, the company was immediately aware of the need for cultural knowledge.

“If the other culture is foreign to you, any preconceived ideas you have may stay at the back of your head once integration starts. Our sales organization already had some understanding of the American culture as our client base also included American customers. However, it’s different when two organizations merge and you start working together on a daily basis.”

Communication and management systems the greatest obstacles

Marjut Nieminen is a cultural skills trainer with wide-ranging experience in training international personnel in the USA. She says that friction between representatives of different cultures is usually due to different communication habits. Nieminen’s specialty is improving interaction in a multicultural work environment.

“In Finland communication is fact-oriented: words convey information. However, the majority of world cultures are people-oriented, which means that even in business you need to establish a personal relationship. In the extreme this means that you only do business with friends,” Nieminen explains.

Different hierarchy concepts and management systems also lead to problems. In Finland organizational hierarchy is often very low, and operations are more or less democratic. Thus Finns may be surprised to find that in many other countries the hierarchy is steeper and that the manager’s role is to be an authority figure.

“Finns taking over the management of a multicultural team must understand that their role is that of a genuine

“An understanding of foreign cultures smooths bumps along the joint path, but you cannot blame all failures on cultural differences”.

– Marjut Nieminen



Small talk needed in business

Finns often regard small talk as trivial or a waste of time. According to Marjut Nieminen, it is neither.

“Small talk plays a very important role in international business. It is one way of starting the business relationship before you move onto cold facts,” the cross-cultural skills trainer says.

Small talk is also important since people with different cultural backgrounds may find it easy to understand that in Finland silence may also be experienced as positive.

What should you talk about with your business partners?

“You can always start by talking about the weather. Other safe topics include food, traffic or local sights. Do not talk about religion, politics, or sex, or criticize the country in question. Common sense and observing what others do will get you far,” she notes.

In the USA, for instance, small talk must not be forgotten even in emails. Instead of simply blurting out the reason for your message, you should try and formulate your message in a lighter style.

“Start by saying something general, then state your message and end with general compliments,” is the advice Nieminen gives.

leader. They must act authoritatively when necessary and make independent decisions. This may be difficult for someone used to the Finnish business culture.”

For example, differences in meeting and decision-making procedures reflect the different hierarchies and management systems: in Finland, meetings are where decisions are made, while in many other countries the purpose of meetings is to gather information and negotiate, while decisions are made by the director alone.

Turning differences into strengths

Reliability, honesty, modesty and privacy are often listed as the traditional Finnish values. They also affect the way Finns act abroad, and may seem strange to others whose own culture has different values.

“For example, the fundamentally positive approach and “Let’s do it!” attitude is an enormous resource for the Americans. For them, nothing is impossible. They emphasize positive aspects and overwhelm you with positive feedback. When this attitude meets Finnish modesty, problems may arise,” Nieminen says.

She nevertheless adds that differences also complement each other.

“Finnish prudence combined with American optimism makes a good resource kit.”

Throwing prejudices to the wind

Marjut Nieminen also organized the cross-cultural training for On2 Technologies Finland. The personnel were divided into groups of 15, each receiving a full day of training.

During the training the participants reviewed various elements of the American culture through concrete examples: communications, business practices, giving feedback, and giving and receiving compliments.

“The training sessions were highly interactive. There was a lot of open discussion and sharing of personal experiences. Initially there may have been a certain lack of enthusiasm, but in the end, everyone stayed until the end and the feedback was positive,” Orajarvi says, describing the participant’s interest in the course.

She sees the main value of the course as making people adjust their preconceived attitudes.

“The course gave many insights into why representatives of another culture act the way they do. For example, saying “no thanks” instead of just “no” doesn’t mean you’re trying to ingratiate yourself with the other person. It’s just the American way to communicate. For Americans, the Finnish tendency to keep it short may come across as brusque.

The cross-cultural skills trainer notes that it is important for both parties to know something of the other person’s culture. On2 Technologies Finland is planning a similar orientation into the Finnish culture for the parent company’s personnel in the USA.

“An understanding of the other person’s cultural background smooths the bumps on the joint path. Not all failures can be explained by cultural differences, however. Clashes may occur even in a monocultural environment,” Nieminen points out.

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Tel. +358 9 4766 7800, www.aacglobal.com, www.wsoypro.fi