

Background

Danger iceberg!

Culture is the set of beliefs, customs, values, and social organization of a particular country or group. Handling different cultures is a key part of business in our globalized world. It is so easy to make mistakes or upset people unintentionally. There are certain things that are visible: the way people look, what they eat, the buildings we see around us, and so on. Yet this visible behaviour is just the tip of the iceberg.

Fundamental beliefs and values are programmed into us from an early age and enter our subconscious. They form the submerged part of the iceberg where behavioural codes that contain our emotional reflexes and belief system are hidden. These cover respect for the family, private and public behaviour and politeness, religious beliefs, gender differences, and how we manage business relationships. It also informs how we compartmentalize our working and private lives. In some cultures people will only do business with someone after they have got to know them well and met each other's families socially. In other parts of the world privacy is closely guarded, and questions of a personal nature taboo. There are cultures where it takes decades for colleagues to move to first name terms, or have a meal together, if ever. Submerged culture also determines our attitude to rules and fairness. What makes a German wait for the green man before crossing a road free from traffic, or an Englishman to form a queue, are both determined by this submerged part of the iceberg. The first has an ingrained respect for rules, and the second an ingrained notion of what is 'fair'. People who can forgive silly mistakes, are outraged by rule-breaking that goes against their subconscious and ingrained cultural beliefs. Like the *Titanic*, the careless navigator can be wrecked by what lies beneath the surface.

So how can we prepare before working abroad or doing business internationally? We can learn something about the superficial differences between cultures

from guides and websites. Frequently they don't go beyond obviously overt and stereotypical behaviour. Yet in many parts of the world feelings are transmitted by almost imperceptible changes in body language and facial expression. Our antennae need to become more sensitive to this and we need to rely less on what is actually said. We should avoid making generalizations based on the behaviour of a few individuals. However, the most important thing we can do is to become aware of our own visible and hidden cultures and know what makes us tick. This alone will make us more forgiving and understanding when foreigners do things differently. We should not immediately assume that people will act the way we do back home.

Three pieces of behaviour that seem to separate the way the British behave from others are small talk, self deprecation, and humour. Empty chat is a feature of British culture that some nationalities find hard to deal with. Psychologists claim that this is because we are happier when dealing with neutral subjects and will do anything to avoid being embarrassed or causing embarrassment. So when Henry Fitzjames first went to Finland he found the silences difficult to cope with. 'It took me a while to realize that the Finns don't really do small talk,' he said. 'I must have sounded like I had verbal diarrhoea!' Katie Hendricks had a problem of a different kind when she went to work abroad for her company. 'English people often make fun of themselves,' she told me, 'but this is totally alien in many countries where the tendency is to be proud of your achievements.' Humour is another area that can cause a lot of consternation. Not to have a sense of humour is seen by most British people as an enormous character flaw. After giving a presentation in Germany, a German colleague asked me why I had a desperate need to begin and end a talk with a joke. 'Business is business and schnapps is schnapps', she reminded me.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner and discuss these questions.

- 1 What for you is your national culture?
- 2 How do you think foreigners see your culture?

2 Read the text quickly and answer these questions.

- 1 What nationality is the writer?
- 2 The writer uses an iceberg analogy. Note the things that are above and below the water.

3 Read the article carefully and answer these questions.

- 1 Why does the writer think that cultural considerations are important in business?
- 2 According to the writer, what determines our behaviour? How can this cause conflict?
- 3 How can people prepare themselves for the challenges posed by another culture?
- 4 Why is it important to understand ourselves?
- 5 What three features of 'Britishness' does he identify that pose problems for foreigners?

4 What is your reaction to the text? Do you agree with what the writer says? What don't you agree with?

5 Match 1–8 to a–h to make collocations from the text.

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------|
| 1 body | a expression |
| 2 stereotypical | b belief |
| 3 facial | c world |
| 4 character | d behaviour |
| 5 silly | e talk |
| 6 globalized | f language |
| 7 fundamental | g mistake |
| 8 small | h flaw |

6 Using the text to help you, decide what the collocations in 5 mean.

7 Match the definitions to words from the text by solving the anagrams.

- 1 a natural and automatic response: _____ ERFXLE
- 2 something that you are not allowed to talk about: _____ OTBAO
- 3 has been there for a long time and is difficult to get rid of: _____ GAIRNDIEN
- 4 extremely shocked and angry: _____ OGTURADE
- 5 badly damaged in an accident: _____ EKRCEWD
- 6 put into categories: _____ TCONPTMMEARLIZEA
- 7 manage something difficult successfully: _____ PCOE
- 8 under the surface: _____ BESUMGEDR

8 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

9 Work with a partner and discuss these questions.

- 1 If we understand what *makes someone tick*, we know what makes that person behave the way they do. What are the things that make people in your culture tick?
- 2 What things make your culture unique and that foreigners often find difficult to manage?
- 3 What difficulties have you encountered with other cultures? Have you had any embarrassing moments or been surprised by things you have seen? How did you cope with the situation?