

Breaking down barriers

Having the capability to work with people across different national cultures on foreign projects, or as part of a mixed international team, is a must for surveyors as globalisation continues, say Donnie MacNicol and Paul Saunders

Different national cultures may view the same thing in very different ways, thus communication can engender or distance you from potential clients or partners. As a follow-up to the article on working in alliances in the April 07 issue of the *Construction Journal*, here are 10 ways to help you create strong, sustainable relationships with peers, partners, team members or clients from other cultures or nationalities.

1. **How will your values, attitudes, behaviours and communication style be perceived** by someone from another culture? For example, they may interpret humour as not taking things seriously. Seek feedback from your work colleagues or from a friendly party in the other culture
2. **Relate to each person as an individual** and not as a stereotype of their national culture. Understanding the values, expectations and beliefs that drive behaviour in different cultures should inform your actions towards an individual, not direct them. Culture doesn't determine anything, but it shapes everything
3. ***Understand who can make what decisions** as it may be at a different level than in your own organisation or be done more quickly or more slowly. In cultures where status is more important than in the UK (such as Spain, Italy, Greece and France) decisions are made nearer the top of an organisation. In cultures where status counts for less (such as Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Netherlands) decisions may be made at lower levels. Decisions may also be made more by individuals (e.g. USA and Australia) rather than through collective decision making (e.g. Japan)
4. ***Identify if their management style is more typically masculine or feminine** – assertive and competitive or modest and caring respectively. This will affect the negotiation styles and relationship types. An assertive approach in times of conflict may be greeted positively in the USA but negatively in Sweden. In a more feminine culture such as Sweden, a modest approach at a presentation may be viewed very positively, whereas in the USA the same presenter may be viewed as lacking commitment, passion or drive
5. ***Understand if they have a short-term or long-term view** as this will affect the way and the speed that projects are assessed, justified and decisions made, e.g. Asian cultures take a much longer view than many Western cultures
6. ***Identify their need for structure and certainty** as this may vary and affect the level of control, definition, risk taking and governance. Agree a common working approach that balances the differences, e.g. you may have to provide much more detail and information for a partner than you would need for a decision to be taken
7. **Develop your empathy skills** and show people you are making every effort to see and feel things as they do. Think of yourself as a 'translator' of your own culture and protocols. Making a small change such as greeting people in their own language or showing knowledge of their culture and its customs will be seen in a positive light
8. **If you are unsure what is appropriate, be more structured** and have more explicit communication rather than less, while remembering that this is not everyone's preferred style. For example, the Japanese have a much more implicit communication style than the British, but will still find it easier to filter superfluous information than have to ask you to expand and elucidate. Always remember to speak clearly and at an appropriate speed and level of language, but never patronise
9. **Ask each person how they would like to be addressed** and treated. Master the correct pronunciation and spelling of the names of people you work with. Talk to them about their expectations and how you can respect their position and the value they add
10. **Assume nothing** – a smile and handshake are not necessarily an agreement, "yes" can mean "no", unsmiling may not mean unfriendly and silence may not mean disagreement. Ask questions and be ready to be flexible. It is much easier to change your own behaviour than influence someone else's.

**Based on the work of Geert Hofstede who has identified five dimensions along which national cultures differ*

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