

Overcoming Barriers to Understanding

There are many obvious and not-so-obvious differences between Canadian and Asian cultures.

Recognizing these differences and overcoming barriers to understanding is vital to negotiating and managing successful investment partnerships in Asia-Pacific.

Language

Communicating with business people from the Asia-Pacific region requires overcoming different cultural viewpoints as well as the language barrier. The Australians do speak English after all, but they use it in subtly different ways. Unless you pay attention to the cultural nuances embedded in their usage, you may miss something important.

The problem is much greater when dealing with business people whose first language is not English, or who do not speak English at all. Even when the words you and your opposite numbers are exchanging have been smoothly and correctly translated, the intended meaning may not have been communicated. When a Japanese business person hesitates and responds to your request with "that may be difficult," what he is really telling you is "no."

Of course, the services of a good translator are vital. Translating your proposition into the language of your hosts is both an important courtesy and a practical aid. Avoid using Canadian business jargon such as "the bottom line" or clichés such as "lean and mean," and remember, when your opposite number nods and smiles, that does not necessarily mean he or she understands you.

In your discussions you will need sensitivity, patience, and politeness. As you talk, pause frequently, and offer to answer questions. Encourage your opposite num-

bers to confer among themselves. Create the impression, however difficult it may be, that time means nothing to you and that your only mission is to communicate fully and honestly.

Relative Values

The goals of Asian business people tend to be somewhat more complex than those of North American business people.

Obviously, both are interested in profits, but the Asians are also keenly interested in long-term benefits. They are looking for stable business relationships with trustworthy and compatible people.

Most Canadian business people think in terms of quarter-to-quarter results and two years is considered a distant horizon for a business. Business people in Asia, however, think in terms of five-, ten-, or even twenty-year spans. That is why they prefer to proceed slowly in negotiations: once a commitment is made, it will be with them for a long time. Asian business people will therefore use the first few meetings simply to get to know you and determine if you are the kind of person that they want to do business with.

Many North American business people get frustrated by the slow pace and seeming complexity of negotiations in Asia. There may be a lot of people involved in making the decisions on the other side and you may not even have a clear idea of who the key players are. In North American companies, decisions tend to be made by a small group of people who must then seek internal agreement before their strategy can be implemented. In many of the Asian countries, especially Japan, the people who will implement the policy have already been included in the decision-making process.