

managing worldwide skills

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Editorial

It's the time of year when many in the Northern Hemisphere board planes and trains to an exciting holiday destination in another country. They do so armed with a keen sense of adventure and the desire to discover how other social groups organize their lives as a community.

I often think that the business world would be a better place if we could infuse our professional encounters with more of the sense of wonder and open-mindedness felt while on holidays. Sadly, with tight deadlines and ambitious objectives to be met, cultural variations in time and task management, as well as approaches to problem-solving and relationship-building, all too often lead to frustration and conflict.

When tension rises in an international organization, many look for a quick list of Do's and Don'ts on how to work with the other nationalities. Although helpful in the short term, these quick tips do not provide a solid foundation for long-term, productive and meaningful business relationships. The cornerstone for these can only be cultural empathy, which comes from an understanding and appreciation of the hidden layers of values and beliefs that lie below the watermark in the culture iceberg.

Writing to us from wintry Australia, Judy Steele Parolini will be exploring aspects of deep Asian culture in this summer edition of our newsletter!



Laurent Lepez, Managing Partner

Exploring deep culture: Fengshui

By Judy Steele Parolini

We all know when we are up against it—culturally that is—that sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach that something is going on and we just haven't a clue what; that we lost out somewhere along the line; that the sun has come up and gone down again and we just weren't part of it.

As the jet touched down at Changi Airport, John Swanson felt the familiar apprehension on coming back to his new home: *I wonder what's next.*

Relocated to Singapore as South East Asian manager for pharmaceuticals, John was three months into the new job. He loved the trips away, the excitement and challenges of new horizons and opening opportunities that each mini adventure brought: the elegant choreography of Japanese negotiations and attention to customer service, the excitement of Bangkok and the warmth of friendly Thai faces. Above all he loved the aloof impregnable mystery of Seoul; ancient palaces closeted behind high walls and secret gates which defied entrance in a direct challenge to the outsider, and by the very act of this challenge, interacted with the newly arrived as if to dare them to try. South Korea is not indifferent, it engages at a highly emotional level.

By comparison, John found Singapore to be an international city, colourful with a warm mixture of cultures. Singapore had shrugged off its ex-colonial status as an ex-British colony and was revitalised after the disappointment of separation from Malaya to build a modern vibrant economy beyond all expectation. *It ought to be easy here*, he thought, as the taxi slid towards the office.

Something was wrong in his Singapore office. Since arriving as the new manager he had strived to build a relaxed and workable place: friendly without being friends, collegial and communicative, but the ease and mild joviality of Australia did not fit well there, and the tension had risen over time. At first he did not notice, being absorbed in the logistics of daily life and adjusting to a new climate and the new living style. The local hires were always the ever polite enigmatic face of Asia. An occasional lunch with an expatriate colleague in the next office was relaxing as they compared notes and made arrangements for the weekend.

John's office was in a modern block close to the financial district...tbc.

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