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# Feeling The Pain

By Lothar Katz

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A cultural divide runs right through the middle of many American companies. It is the gap between those who competently work with people in/from other countries, and those who do not.

You won't learn this by reading a book or two. Imagination simply is not enough to prepare for the challenges and frustrations of working across cultures. You'll need first-hand experience, feeling the pain yourself and learning the hard way what you critically need to know. As a leader or individual contributor, success in international business requires opening yourself up as a person and learning to deal with aspects and situations that can be thoroughly discomfoting.

I'm not talking about eating grilled snakes in Taiwan, singing along unfamiliar Karaoke tunes in Portugal, or drinking bitter-tasting tea while seated cross-legged on the floor of a Bedouin tent in Yemen. What this is about is discovering that Arabs may initially ask ten times the true value of an item you want to buy from them, that a Chinese counterpart may inquire why you don't have kids, that a group of Finns you're spending the evening with may not be speaking a single word in several minutes, or that a Costa Rican working for you may expect you to hire his brother-in-law because "he is such a great guy". None of these situations presents any dangers, but all of them are likely to be deeply uncomfortable for many Americans. They raise questions about ethics, respect, trust, and more. Reacting the wrong way can kill opportunities and destroy relationships.

The pressure gets worse if bigger things are at stake. How do you convince that colleague of yours, who recently moved over from France, that your ideas about a project your boss expects both of you to complete are promising? How do you resolve tensions between the American and the Indian parts of the international team you depend on to make a project successful? How do you convince that seemingly interested, but nevertheless noncommittal, Korean company to sign the contract you've been pursuing for months? How do you gain access to that Argentinean executive who appears unwilling to meet with you, although what you are offering should be of great interest? These challenges can be vexing, because your success recipes, the lessons for effective problem solving you learned from past (domestic) situations may no longer work. Once you reach this point of "feeling the pain", you will be ready to start learning.

Mastering such challenges takes a distinctive set of skills:

1. The ability to recognize cross-cultural issues as such.
2. The sensitivity to identify underlying causes.
3. The knowledge to find practical solutions.
4. The experience to implement them smoothly and move on.

The first skill requires awareness and experience, the second a sensitivity that some people have naturally, others need to learn. The third one can be acquired from books or through training. The last skill is again based on practical experience. People who master all four of them will thrive in the global economy. The others may be very competent in their area of specialization. However, when facing cross-cultural challenges, they could go from highly effective to highly ineffective in the blink of an eye.

Some people don't even make the first step. They may not see an issue because they "deal with foreigners all the time." Upon closer inspection, however, those "foreigners" often turn out to be people who came from abroad to become Americans - a mother-in-law who lived in Greece as a kid, Asian co-workers who lived in the States since college, or a Mexican housekeeper who grew up in West Texas. Sorry, those kinds of experiences just won't help much.

The brutal truth is that in today's economy, there is no such thing as a domestic job. Global trade and travel, in- and outsourcing, virtual collaboration, and the internet have made international contacts a part of everyone's life, no matter what it is they do. Consequently, if you never tackled tough cross-cultural challenges, if you did not learn how to overcome your cultural bias and work with the "other side", then you simply aren't ready for the job market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Are you feeling the pain yet?

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Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor and the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World". He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.