

by Richard Pooley



# When cultures collide

**Developing an awareness of cross-cultural factors in international business and handling them properly is essential if you want your global business activities to be effective.**

**T**he client rang me out of the blue. Could I fly to Munich and help solve a crisis? I agreed, but after hearing a brief account of what had happened, I wasn't optimistic I could provide a solution.

Eighteen months earlier two famous international companies - one Japanese, the other German - had signed a joint venture agreement to develop, produce and launch a product that had the potential to capture a new market. The joint venture would combine the

marketing skills of one company with the technology and design skills of the other (my client).

To the management of both it must have seemed the perfect business marriage. Within weeks of the deal being signed, a group of Japanese design engineers was sent to Bavaria to work alongside a German team of similar size and expertise. The energy and enthusiasm surrounding the deal was infectious.

But, within a few days of their

arrival, the Japanese engineers were in a state of shock. They found their German collaborators to be rude, inconsiderate and lazy. The Germans interrupted during meetings and presentations, and showed no interest in reaching consensus through the numerous 'pre-meeting' meetings that are an integral part of Japanese business culture. The Japanese were uncomfortable with the German way of arguing everything out in front of everyone: for the Japanese, the potential for loss of face was just too big. They also disliked what they saw as the Germans' willingness to go home, even when tasks were unfinished.

As for the Germans, they were equally unhappy with the Japanese, many of whom seemed unable to speak English, the supposed common language of the team. The Germans complained that even those who could speak it didn't state their opinions clearly and frankly. By the time I was called in, the two sides were hardly speaking to each other. They expressed opinions that can only be described as racist. Communication had broken down completely. The team was disbanded.

**We're all the same, aren't we?**  
So what had gone wrong? The

answer is that the two organisations should have been aware of the dangers that can arise when teams, or individuals, from different cultures are suddenly brought together in the workplace.

**"We are all influenced by the culture from which we originate."**

Unfortunately, it is still rare for senior executives to take cross-cultural differences seriously when making decisions on mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and licensing agreements in the international arena. It doesn't help that institutional shareholders and analysts rarely regard cross-cultural differences as significant, either. Yet there is plenty of evidence that cultural differences are a major reason why so many of cross-border joint ventures fail.

It is rare for organisations to bother with the nitty-gritty details of how the people lower down the hierarchy will run meetings, make

*How important is punctuality and sticking to deadlines?*

decisions, solve problems, manage staff and communicate proposals. Yet, people from different cultures carry out all these procedures differently in diverse ways. The trouble is, each culture assumes their way is the 'normal' one. Unexplained deviations from these norms are perceived as, well, deviant and even devious. People start to think: can we trust people from other countries who do things in this strange way?

In the case of the German and Japanese companies, neither organisation bothered to give their people any understanding of the cultural attitudes and behaviour of the other side. No attempt was made to get the new team to discuss their differences - and similarities. For example, both the Japanese and Germans expect punctuality and clear, detailed agendas. The team had no chance to establish the best way to work together.

#### **What's the solution?**

Different types of cross-border deals require a variety of solutions. The company for which I work, Canning, has been helping organisations find and deliver the right mix of solutions to cross-cultural issues since 1965.

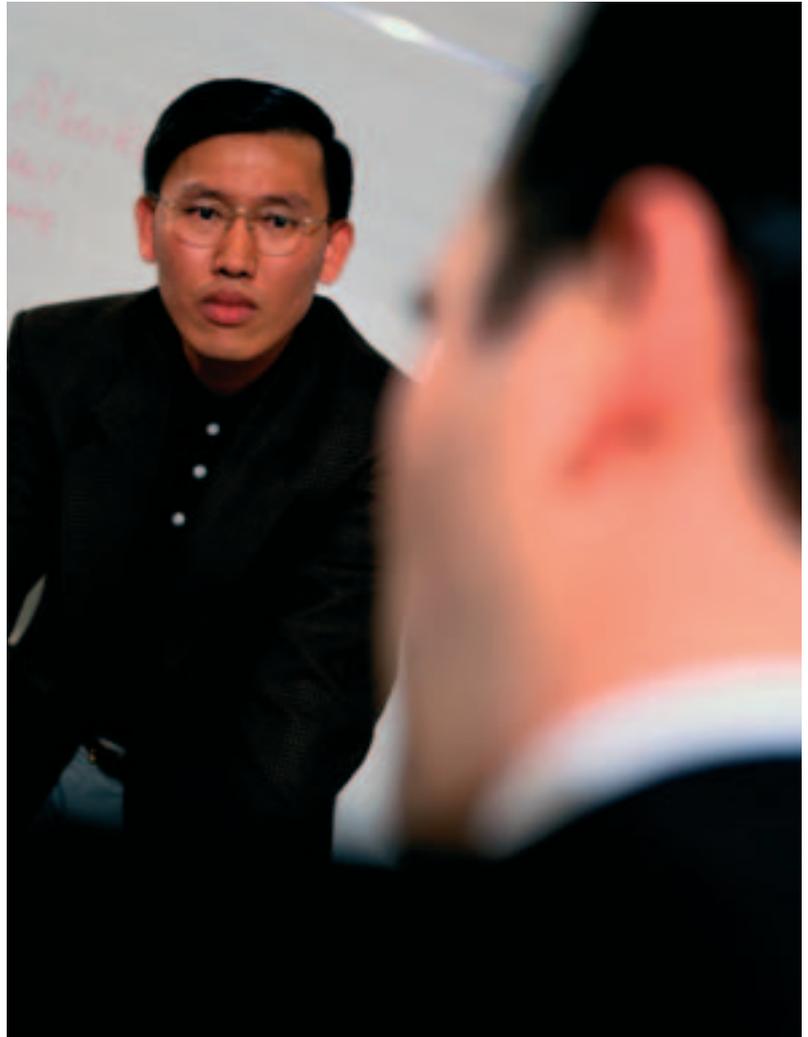
Sometimes the answer can lie in providing a combination of intensive language and cross-cultural training for key personnel. Or we may join in the kick-off meeting for a new multinational team and help team members learn about the cross-cultural differences and similarities of their new colleagues. This work offers team members useful insights into how they can best work together, a process that can be further facilitated by other assistance we offer. We may run a series of generic cross-cultural courses to try and make staff realise that 'the way we do things around here' is not necessarily the way that Klaus or François do things there.

Renault decided very early on in its alliance with Nissan to invest massively in cross-cultural training, team building and consultancy for managers at all levels of the company. They wanted to be sure that their mostly French staff had a good understanding of the cultural norms and expectations of their Japanese partners. Over the past four years, Canning has trained more than 1550 Renault employees



on over 140 courses about Japanese business culture. And since 2002, Canning's office in Tokyo has delivered a mirror course on French culture to more than 400 Nissan employees. Unlike the disastrous German-Japanese case chronicled above, the Renault-Nissan alliance has been successful.

*Do they like to be frank and direct?*



### Offshore English in action

- ◆ The usual injunction, speak slowly, results in British people sounding patronising when they speak to non-natives. Better to pause frequently after a phrase or sentence.
- ◆ Keep sentences short and simple. Restrict yourself to one idea per sentence.
- ◆ English has a larger vocabulary than French or Italian. Two English words can mean essentially the same thing; English is a hybrid of Germanic (German and Scandinavian) and Romance (based mainly around classical Latin, medieval Latin and French). When speaking, the British tend to use words derived from the Germanic side. When we write however, the vocabulary is more Romance in origin. Yet it is the latter, more formal English, which so many non-native English speakers learn at school, even the Germans and Scandinavians. Hence they will understand you better when you *inform* them rather than *tell* them something.
- ◆ There are many English words and phrases that sound familiar to non-native English speakers, but mean something completely different to them. These are called false friends. The word *actually* means *now* to most continental Europeans (*actuellement* in French). Similarly, *eventually* means *possibly* to the French. Remember that American English and British English can also be significantly different. For example, *we sanctioned the deal* means in British English that we *allowed* the deal, but in American English it means *we prohibited the deal*.
- ◆ Phrasal verbs and verbs that tend to consist of monosyllabic words such as *get*, *put*, *take*, *set* combined with prepositions or adverbial particles such as *in*, *out*, *to*, *from*, *up*, *down* - are particularly difficult for non-native speakers to understand. Phrasal verbs cause problems for two reasons. Firstly, because the use of a different adverbial particle or preposition can completely change the meaning. Secondly, because there are many ambiguities. It is best to avoid phrasal verbs completely and replace them with a more formal word eg postpone rather than *put off*.
- ◆ Try to avoid colloquial idioms when talking to non-native speakers. I well remember the acute embarrassment I caused when working as a teacher in Botswana many years ago. A 60-year-old female colleague had had some good news from her home in Canada. I mentioned to my pupils that she was 'over the moon' about it. At the end of the class they all ran over to Edith and congratulated her for 'this miracle from God' and asked her if she wanted her baby to be a boy or a girl. In Setswana - Botswana's national language - you are pregnant when you 'jump the moon'. And how would some non-native English speakers interpret the first sentence of this article?

#### What kind of training really works?

You can only handle differences properly if you understand that you yourself are far from being a neutral observer, but are starting with many ingrained prejudices and preconceptions of your own. The fact that you start with these is nothing to be ashamed of. We are all influenced by the culture from which we originate.

At Canning, we believe there are four key stages necessary for people to develop cross-cultural awareness. Firstly, you need to know yourself. You must identify and be aware of what constitutes 'normal' behaviour for you. What are your values? How do you see the world? What kind of behaviours and preconceptions in social and business settings do you regard as the norm? Of course, what you regard as the norm is not really an objective norm, but only your take on it. But you need to understand this before you can move on to the next stage.

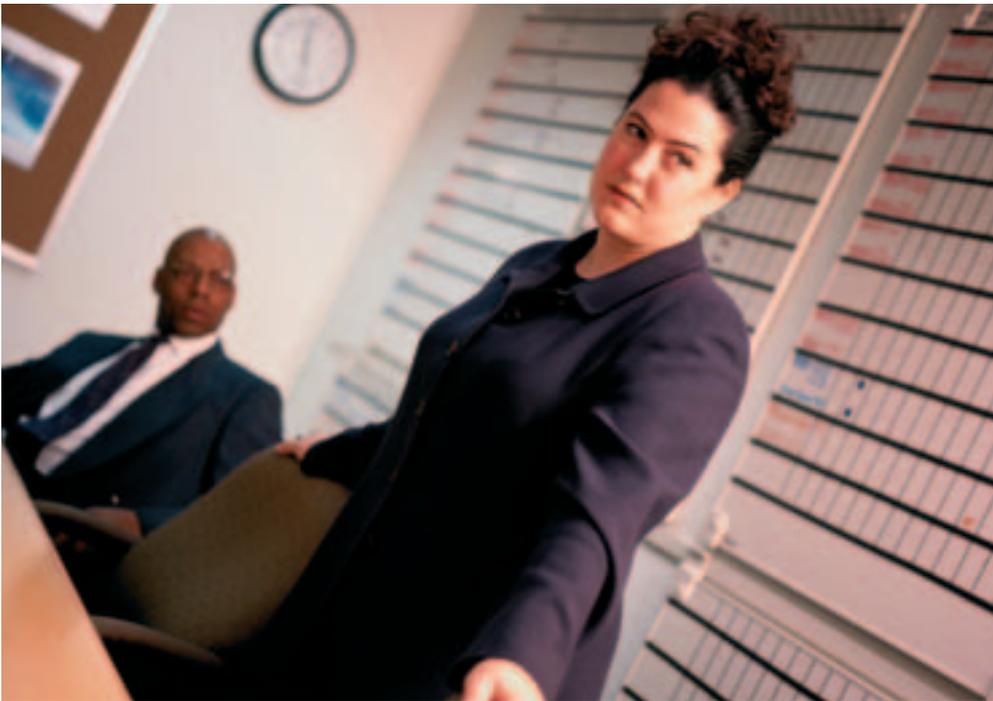
Next, you need to understand the factors that have determined what your counterparts in different countries regard as the norm. At Canning we like to analyse this in a

three-fold manner, which we refer to as Facts, Attitudes, Behaviour. This consists of the **facts** (eg the geographical, demographic, historical, religious, educational, economic factors) that have created the **attitudes** which shape the **behaviour** of the people from the particular culture you are dealing with.

Particular attention should be paid to thinking about the attitudes which you and others are likely to take about the following:

- ◆ Time. How important is punctuality and sticking to deadlines?
- ◆ Truth. What is their attitude towards honesty, right and wrong?
- ◆ Relationships. One example would be how do they regard people who are older or senior to them?
- ◆ The human condition. What is their attitude to risk and do they believe they have free choice?
- ◆ Communication. Do they like to be frank and direct?

Everyone, even from the same



country, sees these factors to some extent in different ways, but people from the same country generally, though not inevitably, tend to exhibit certain 'clustering' in their cultural assumptions and attitudes. By examining these clusterings, it is possible to build up a useful picture of the kind of cultural perceptions

*Communication had broken down completely.*

and attitudes likely to be influencing people from the country in question.

The third step of handling cross-cultural differences is to know how others see you. It is essential you develop an awareness of how people from other cultures perceive you and your own culture. You

especially need to be aware of any negative perceptions they might have.

The fourth step is to learn to adapt, whilst remaining true to your own values. But you can, and frequently should, make a conscious effort, in a non-patronising fashion, to alter your communication style if you are to work effectively with people from other cultures. In particular, think about how you use English. The box contains some tips for how you can modify your use of English into what we at Canning call 'Offshore English', a simplified English that it is helpful to adopt when doing business with non-native speakers.

Richard Pooley heads the London office of the management training, development and communication organisation, Canning, which offers a range of courses and consultancy to organisations who want their people to have the skills to deal with cross-cultural differences. He can be contacted on 020 7370 1055, richard.pooley@canning.co.uk

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