

Corporate initiatives

There's no way you can undo a lifetime's conditioning, of course. But, when you're working internationally, you have to make some effort to understand and adapt to the way different cultures see things. If not, the company's attempts to project a consistent and harmonious external image will lead to considerable conflict and disharmony internally:

The American HQ of an international chemicals company produced a 'quality chart' which included the following statement: 'Each and every one of us will take responsibility for the quality of our products.' They sent the chart to the Belgian, French, German and UK subsidiaries, and asked them to sign it and send it back.

The Belgians, the British and the Germans complied with the request straight away. But nothing was received from the French. Several e-mails were sent to chase it up, but these remained unanswered. Finally Harvey (the American boss) called Luc (the French manager) to find out what was going on. The conversation went something like this:

Harvey: I'm calling about the quality initiative. Did you get the chart we sent you last month?

Luc: Yes.

Harvey: Oh you did get it. Good. So could you get everyone to sign it and send it back to us? By the end of the week, if you can.

Luc: Well, no, I'm afraid I can't. I've discussed it with the team and none of us is willing to sign it.

Harvey: Not willing? Why not?

Luc: We don't agree with it.

Harvey: You don't agree with it?

Luc: No.

Harvey: But it isn't a question of agreement. All we're asking for is your buy-in.

Luc: Yes and, as I said, we can't do that. It's not logical. Production and quality control are in Belgium.

Harvey: What difference does that make?

Luc: How can we be held responsible for something we have no control over?

Harvey: No one's going to hold you responsible. We're just asking you to pledge yourselves to the global quality initiative.

Luc: But the document clearly says: 'Each and every one of us will take responsibility for the quality of our products.' We can't possibly sign it.

Harvey and Luc discussed this question again several times, without success. Luc and his colleagues refused to be moved and their relations with the Americans grew increasingly hostile. *Eventually* (finally), the Belgian country manager intervened and suggested a compromise that both sides were prepared to accept. Luc and his colleagues would sign the quality chart if Harvey gave them a written assurance that they wouldn't be held contractually responsible for the aims that were stated in it. Harvey thought this was obvious and couldn't understand why they were being so difficult. The French were equally perplexed: 'In that case', they said, 'the chart is meaningless. So why are you issuing it?' Relations between the two countries remained hostile for some time.

There's no doubt in our minds that Luc and his team were as committed to product quality as Harvey was. So why did this corporate initiative lead to so much misunderstanding, frustration and resentment? At first sight, the whole situation is very puzzling. The USA is famous for having an extremely litigious culture: few business deals are finalized until the lawyers have drawn up a detailed contract that covers every possible eventuality; people will usually only sign a contract if they're confident it is *watertight* (comprehensive and impossible to misinterpret); they will tend to consult it regularly throughout the life of the deal; and partners who fail to honour their contractual obligations will most probably be threatened with legal action. So why didn't Harvey understand Luc's reluctance to sign the quality chart?

Well, most of the international business people we work with would agree that the USA also has a forward-looking culture where taking an optimistic, upbeat approach is the norm; and where people feel fairly comfortable stating their beliefs, hopes and intentions both openly and publicly. When Harvey was at school, for example, he and his classmates started each day by putting their hands on their hearts and pledging their allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. For him, publicly confirming your commitment to quality is similar to pledging yourself to 'one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all'. So it simply didn't occur to him that anyone would regard the chart as a legal contract. That's why he was so puzzled when Luc said he didn't agree with it: 'But it isn't a question of agreement. All we're asking for is your buyin'; and 'We're just asking you to pledge yourselves to the global quality initiative.' But, of course, Luc isn't a native English speaker and the subtle vocabulary differences meant nothing to him. As far as he was concerned, Harvey was asking him to agree to take responsibility for something he had no control over.

Luc tried very hard to explain his position, but Harvey didn't seem to register what he was saying. That may be because the two colleagues would lean towards opposite ends of this scale:

Analytical					Intuitive					
What I value most is a logical, comprehensive and consistent argument. Even if I instinctively feel a proposal is right, I need to test every step in the argument before I can commit myself.					What I value most are creative and intriguing ideas that appeal to the emotions. If I instinctively feel a proposal is right, I don't need to test every single step in the argument before I commit myself.					
50	40	30	20	10	0	10	20	30	40	50

As soon as they received the quality chart, the analytical French immediately tested the logic of what they were being asked to do. The wording was clear and unambiguous: 'Each and every one of us will take responsibility for the quality of our products.' Clearly, then, if they signed the chart, it would have the force of a contract. If there were a quality failure, they would be in breach of that contract. And Luc and his team could end up losing their jobs as a result. But quality control was in Belgium. So there was no way they could be held responsible. Straight Cartesian logic. And because Harvey refused to acknowledge their argument, the French immediately suspected his motives. This was obviously a devious head office plot to cut headcount without making redundancy payments.

Harvey's approach to the quality chart was far more intuitive. Committing yourself to product quality was unquestionably the right thing to do. Sure, production and quality control were in Belgium. So obviously the French couldn't be held responsible for problems that arose there. But that didn't prevent them from monitoring customer satisfaction and responding fast and efficiently to complaints. And that was all he was expecting them to do.

The two colleagues are viewing the situation from opposite poles. And they both assume that their own view is the norm. As a result, it doesn't even occur to Harvey that there is any other way of interpreting the quality chart than his own. Similarly, it doesn't occur to Luc that the Americans would bother to issue such a chart – and ask him to sign it – if they didn't intend to enforce it.

So what could Harvey have done to avoid all this unnecessary drama and ill-will? Well, have another look at the way he handled the phone call to Luc. He didn't make much effort to find out what Luc's concerns really were, did he? He was far too busy concentrating on himself and what he wanted. As a result, he pushed all the wrong buttons.

According to American anthropologist, Edward T Hall (*Understanding Cultural Differences*, 1989):

The essence of effective cross-cultural communication is more to do with releasing the right responses than with sending the right messages.