

Managing International Teams

Contributed by Dean W. Engel

Revised November 2006

The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.

SUMMARY

Cultural issues are of great concern when working internationally. To avoid cultural faux pas in international business dealings, it is essential to conduct some preliminary research on a country's cultural norms and values.

ASSUMPTIONS CAN BE DANGEROUS

Many assumptions come naturally to U.S. building-team managers: the best decision makers turn to their team members for ideas, everyone at every level points out areas for improvement, the best person for the job should get the job, everyone pitches in when the job requires it, competitiveness breeds teamwork and success, and people should do what they say they will do. However, the same can-do spirit that drives construction and industry in this country, from the Seabees to Saturn cars, is sometimes the antithesis to team behavior in other cultures.

To be an effective team manager in China, for instance, you should know that public praise makes a person there uncomfortable. A forthright "no" is considered inappropriate in Japan. In India, when a person moves his or her head quickly back and forth in response to something you say, it doesn't indicate disagreement but rather signals, "Yes, I understand what you're saying." It is offensive in the Middle East to see the soles of someone else's shoes. In many places outside the United States and Europe, you must establish a relationship with someone before that person will begin a business deal.

How can one get a grasp on all of these differences? With so many ways to go wrong and never know it, you need to do a little preliminary work, starting with solid sources of information.

BEHAVIOR VERSUS VALUES

There is a distinction between behavior and the values and beliefs from which behavior derives. It may be useful to know, for example, how to give and

receive business cards in Japan. It is far more useful to know that, in Japan, business cards are seen as an extension of the person. The underlying value of the exchange, then, is that the Japanese value each other as individuals and respect each other as part of the culture. Once you know that, you know how to behave and why. By extension, you come to understand why an older person is shown greater deference and attention.

In the South Asian subcontinent, an American manager asking a group for their opinions about what to do may confuse the team. They are unaccustomed to offering their viewpoints and may wonder whether the manager is competent. In their culture, it is the manager's responsibility to decide what to do.

Developing an understanding of culture is especially important in business, which is rife with unwritten rules of behavior that concern, among other matters, notions of leadership, the role of team members, whether advice is offered or solicited, and how people get promoted.

About the Contributor

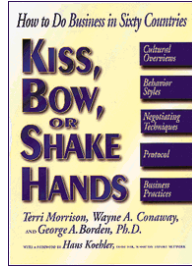
Dean W. Engel is a senior fellow of the Advanced Management Institute (AMI), a San Francisco-based firm that provides consulting and training in intercultural issues and communications, project management, and leadership skills. Engel is also managing director of the East West Group Inc. He has worked extensively in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. He designed and teaches AMI's course on Managing International Project Teams and has designed and conducts in-firm training programs in project management and leadership for large design firms.

Engel has 30 years of experience in U.S. and international human resource development, management, and business communications. He has previously been a member of the faculty and administration of New York University and is the

author of several books, including *Global Human Resource Development*, *Passport Japan*, and *Passport USA*.

RESOURCES

Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries, by Terri Morrison, Wayne A. Conaway, and George A. Borden, PhD, is a good reference book that addresses the many types of interaction while working on an international team.

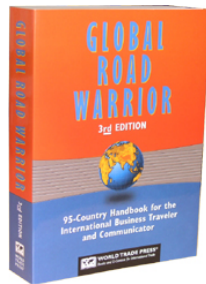


Country Business Guides

For more in-depth information about a particular country, consult World Trade Press’s Country Business Guide series, a compendium of information about legal systems, licensing, commercial law, and much more.

Global Road Warrior

For serious international business travelers, World Trade Press publishes *The Global Road Warrior*, which covers more than 100 countries and provides a wealth of practical information such as what the money looks like, how to use the telephones, and where to go if you’re injured or sick. While not a cultural reference, such information can be vital in adapting to daily life in a foreign country.



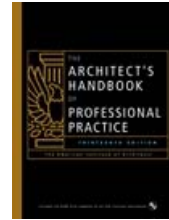
More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 06.04.03 International Videoconferencing
- 06.04.04 International Practice Checklist
- 06.04.10 Preparing to Work Overseas

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Practicing in a Global Market” by Roger B. Williams, FAIA and C. Richard Meyer, FAIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 6, page 100. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org.

Keywords

- Practice
- Project administration
- Project communication
- International communications