

First Impressions DO Matter

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Bill Gates' recent gaffe when meeting Korea's new president reinforces the need for our global leaders today to be cultural savvy. The incident that spurred international uproar in the media occurred when Mr. Gates greeted Korea's new female president, Park Geun-hye. Mr. Gates was clearly unaware of Korean protocol and shook President Park's hand while keeping his left hand in his pocket and slouching. While this relaxed and informal way of greeting may be more acceptable in the U.S. it is important to understand how it may be perceived in other cultures. In a country like Korea, where non-verbal communication and formalities prevail, people are attuned to subtleties that may be lost on most Americans and may be more easily insulted. The proper way to have greeted President Park would have first been to wait to see if she initiated the handshake (since Korean women tend to avoid doing this with men) and then to grasp his right forearm with his left hand while shaking her hand. [Click here](#) to read the Washington Post article in which Intercultural Alliances is featured for more details on this incident.

Similarly, President Obama received much criticism at home when he bowed deeply to Japanese Emperor Akihito during a state visit to Japan a few years ago. While many Americans felt that President Obama was ingratiating himself and his bow was a sign of weakness, he actually demonstrated appropriate behavior from a Japanese standpoint. In a hierarchical society like Japan, bowing deeply, particularly to one's elder and someone of high stature, shows respect and deference.

Political and business leaders often represent the face of their respective countries. While in many situations, making a cultural blunder similar to Bill Gates' recent incident will not have a long-lasting negative effect it may nonetheless present an additional challenge to building a positive relationship. For example, Jeff, a participant in a recent training workshop, described how a culturally-diverse colleague told him after a few months of working together that she didn't like him when she first met him. Apparently, during their initial meeting Jeff was leaning back in his chair with his elbow resting casually over the back of it. Jeff explained that he is a laid-back person and was shocked when he later learned that his colleague found his body composure so disrespectful that she immediately formed a negative image of him in her mind. She further told him that it took several months for her to change her opinion of him based on this initial interaction.

First impressions DO matter. Knowing culturally-appropriate ways of meeting and greeting others can affect future interactions and set the stage for whether or not someone wants to even consider collaborating further. While it is important to remain authentic to who you are, there are nonetheless certain situations where not showing appropriate sensitivity to your culturally-diverse colleague or client's protocol can make or break the deal. Here are a few questions to consider when meeting someone from another culture:

- Are there different norms to greeting someone based on his/her hierarchical position?
- Which common gestures in my culture might be offensive in another culture?
- Is it acceptable (or not) to display emotion?
- What is considered to be rude behavior in this person's culture?
- Are there gender-specific issues that I should be aware of?

Cultivating self-awareness of your own behavior is a critical first step when interacting with someone from a different culture for the first time. It is also important to educate yourself *in advance* of cultural expectations they may hold. Once you are armored with this knowledge, you can determine your course of action and if it is possible to stretch yourself to adapt to a new behavior while at the same time being true to your values. Cross-cultural competence is more than knowing the do's and don'ts. While these are important, understanding the *hows* and the *whys* of behavior will have a more lasting affect and provide you with necessary tools to succeed with your intercultural interactions.