

Thawing Cross-Cultural Tensions

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Like many of you at least in the eastern part of the U.S., I'm waiting with much anticipation for spring to show her first blossoms. The unpredictable weather this winter reminds me of similar volatilities that occur in the global work environment. While we wait for the ice and snow to melt, I've been reflecting upon the need to also thaw some of those conflicts we experience at work when someone is not behaving in ways we consider appropriate.

One challenge that frequently causes blood pressures to rise with my American clients is the lack of responses to emails. Whether they are working with the French, Indians, or Brazilians, their frustration can be further fueled by the perception that their counterparts overseas are not showing them respect or are not doing their jobs properly. As their exasperation escalates so does the damage to the relationship as they continue to push their colleagues to get an answer. Finally, it becomes a full-fledged conflict dominated by cross-cultural misunderstandings.

These misunderstandings, characterized by heightened judgments and decreased trust, can have a downward spiral effect. As a further complication associated with working in a virtual environment, it's impossible to walk to their colleague's office to address the issue in a personal manner.

Layers of cultural expectations can deepen the dispute when communication styles vary. For example, a recent participant in one of my workshops mentioned how, in exasperation, he had spoken harshly to one of his colleagues in China during a meeting. While his colleague didn't say anything, subsequent interactions were notably chillier. What the American didn't realize was that in favoring a straightforward and frank approach to addressing the issue he may have unconsciously caused his colleague to lose face, particularly given the public nature of his comments.

When you next find yourself in an interaction with a culturally-diverse colleague that's taking on glacial proportions, you might consider applying the three Ps to drive your success:

- **Pausing** encourages you to step back to reflect upon past behaviors and interactions you've had with the individual prior to acting. The more reactive you are to a situation, the higher the risk of inadvertently saying or doing something you'll regret later. Creating that momentary space allows you to clear your mind to observe the situation through a clearer lens. This will allow you to assess the best course of action to take.

- **Probing** stresses the importance of appreciative inquiry to explore the other person's perspective. This requires you to ask the appropriate questions. More often than not, your colleague is not intentionally trying to sabotage your work but may have a culturally-derived reason for his/her behavior.
- **Propelling** enables you to take the necessary steps to adopt a proactive approach to goal setting, problem-solving and creating a mutually agreeable solution that will engage, motivate and reward both parties.

While the ice doesn't melt overnight when some sort of misunderstanding or miscommunication has arisen, being mindful of the cultural considerations to how you address it make all the difference. This can help you avoid a long drawn out conflict and instead bolster your relationship in a positive manner.