



WHAT IS YOUR PREFERRED WAY?

- About cultural differences in a work environment.

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The Spaniards are slow and spend a lot of time talking... When do they ever work...?

The Scandinavians drink a lot of coffee and it seems that no one takes decisions at meetings... How can they ever be successful in business...?

From early childhood we all develop a way to look at the world and to understand how people behave. We unwittingly categorize things into "what is good" and "what is bad". This is deeply rooted in our cultural values. What most of us do not understand is that we use our own culture judgements on other cultures - what we perceive as similar to our own culture values we consider being "good" or "right". And what we

perceive to be different from our own culture values, we consider being "bad" or "wrong".

Why is that? Let us use a metaphor to better understand this dynamic. If you imagine that we all see the world through a pair of tinted sunglasses – but each culture has a different tint in their lens. The problem is because we have been wearing our glasses since birth we do not realize that the lens is tinted and alters our perception of the world. Added to that everyone around us is wearing sunglasses with the same tint... so how should we realize that its only people in our culture that see the world the same way I do?

To understand a new culture you have to be prepared to remove your own tinted glasses and to try to wear the glasses from a new culture to see the world as they do. We need to

perceive the intention behind the behaviours of our colleagues, not just judge the behaviour itself. If not, it leads to misunderstandings and suddenly we start stereotyping negatively about the Spaniards always being on siesta and the Scandinavians not being able to take decisions.

Apples or oranges – we are motivated differently

To help us understand the behavioural differences between the Spaniards and the Scandinavians, we need to understand what it is that drives each of us to perform. Scandinavians thrive in a position with meaningful content and a high degree of autonomy. The manager is seen more as a coach, a person who guides employees rather than someone who instructs and supervises. A pleasant work

ambience includes a high level of collaboration and knowledge sharing plus a feeling that subordinates are being heard in decision making and have an influence on outcomes. The hierarchical distance is very small and people collaborate across all levels of the organization in order to get the best possible outcome.

An example of this is the many informal talks at the water cooler or coffee machine that Scandinavians tend to have. People outside the culture often see this behaviour and think the Scandinavians “always take breaks”. In reality, Scandinavians are discussing business, informally brainstorming possible solutions and then taking decisions. When the ‘formal’ meeting takes place later, everything has already been discussed, opinions have been voiced and, in reality, decisions have been taken. The ‘formal’ meeting becomes more a “how do we move along” brainstorm between people across the organization rather than a discussion on which way to take and why. This has already been clarified.

This contrasts starkly with Spanish management, which motivates by being highly visible. A manager needs to create clear standardization and walk in front by taking decisions and keeping control. People expect to receive clear instructions from his or her manager about what to do and not to do. This includes providing clear direction on priorities, and the manager needs to decide, on behalf of the subordinates, what comes first and second. It is the manager’s responsibility, not the employees, to set the prior-

ity, although it might create a collision with his/her own priorities or personal commitments.

By doing this management respects the need of employees by avoiding uncertainty. Spanish employees feel strongly demotivated if management does not pay attention to their performance. An invisible manager which does not check up on progress is perceived as bad news and the employees tend to feel they are not taken seriously by management. It creates unwanted insecurity in a work environment.

Hierarchical differences in Spain are much bigger than in Scandinavia. It is common to hear that Scandinavians not knowing what to do when authority is needed start to behave very undemocratic and with a stereotype are described as “Scandinavian Germans”. But even with larger hierarchical differences one must take the employees needs into consideration and listen, also in regard to personal issues. In Spain people expect to receive support from management as relationships and connections are vital. Without a personal relationship you cannot motivate people. This softens up the distance between the different hierarchical levels.

All roads lead to Rome...

It is easy for Spaniards and Scandinavians to label each other as ineffective and question how we actually get work done. Many Scandinavians are seen by Spaniards as ‘weird people working just a little but still generating big business’. It is even considered poor management to work long hours! However, when we take our

tinted glasses off we see that the Scandinavians may only work 8-16 but all of the small informal talks are not breaks but informal work discussions in order to speed up decision making and ensure that all have had a chance to give their input. And the knowledge sharing in a flat hierarchy ensures that business goes on even when someone is away.

The Spaniards on the other hand... “No wonder they have to work long hours”. With all the time they spend small talking as if they have nothing better to do. Why is it important to start all conversations with ¿Cómo estás?... However, this is the vital relationship building, listening to opinions being communicated very subtle and the insurance of subordinates that everything is fine and work is on track. And the longer hours come natural when you cannot leave before your direct manager because you must prove yourself important. And s/he also has to show how important s/he is for the company by needing to stay longer because of the work load.

We should mention that by now the long siesta of 2-3 hours is in most places a stereotype and the long hours do not have to compensate for this. Many companies are cutting down on lunch breaks. But still for a typical Scandinavian used to 30 minutes, an hour or more seems long. The long lunches are nowadays reserved for celebrating a contract, the signature of a big agreement or to establish a relationship in the beginning of collaboration.

The conclusion is that we all have our preferred way of doing things and it is difficult to change that. Especially, if we

do not understand why we react on the difference as we do. When we talk about cultural differences we often tend to make it a matter about the others and we forget that for them we are the others. We need to understand ourselves first.

The concept of honour in communication

An important difference between Scandinavians and Spaniards is our way of communicating. Scandinavians are often perceived as rude, blunt and offending. Spaniards on the other hand can be perceived as slow in getting back, withholding knowledge and not participating in discussions.

The difference is that Scandinavians tend to be very direct even if the message is not polite or pleasant: A spade is a spade! Scandinavians will not wait for an invitation to talk and will not hesitate to tell you if they disagree or have questions. Nor are they afraid to make a mistake by taking a chance: we all learn from our mistakes.

This way of communicating is different from the Spanish, more formalized form, where you do not communicate freely across organizational levels. As a rule of thumb, if you wish to progress successfully in a company you must never jump your direct manager to talk to people higher up in the organization. Diplomacy and indirect communication are key elements. Context is always considered and Spaniards try to avoid situations where somebody could lose face. Thoughts and ideas are predefined by the group you belong to and it is important not to harm or offend anyone as this destroys harmony and the working relation-

ship. Conflict avoidance is strong and it is better to check with colleagues or a superior before giving an answer or saying something. This creates a delay in getting back with an answer in emails and has an impact on brainstorming sessions.

A fundamental difference is that for Scandinavians work is work and private life is private life. They can disagree openly on one work project and still collaborate respectfully on the next and maintain a friendship. This is more difficult for Spaniards where you perceive yourself as one whole and not with two different identities. A discussion can scale up very easily and if a Scandinavian is too direct in his or hers communication style, s/he can experience that the trust and thus loyalty will disappear. An "I am sorry" does not fix it. There is no difference between professional and personal life. Forgive and forget becomes more complicated when personal honour is involved.

Hacerse el sueco

On a final note we would like to share with you the Spanish expression "hacerse el sueco", to behave like a Swede. The saying describes the behaviour of a person questioned by somebody but gives no immediate reaction. For Spaniards, this lack of an immediate reaction is poorly perceived as they are themselves very emotional and easily express emotions with facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. They are Latinos. Scandinavians tend to be the opposite. Often others cannot read their faces,

there is a lack of body movement, the voice is monotone and they are seen as short and precise in their answers.

The way that both cultures behave, Scandinavians and Spaniards, is perceived by the other as different and something that ideally needs to 'change'. The other way is however better seen as 'just different'... not better, not worse, just a different approach. It is also worth remembering that 'the other way' is deeply rooted in that person's cultural roots and value system and comes as naturally and effortlessly as breathing. We do ourselves a favour by remembering that it might be a different way, but that does not mean a 'worse way' than our own way. Respecting different cultures and different ways of working will help us in our collaboration.

This article is co-written by Lena Lauridsen (Denmark) and Javier San Martin (Spain) both are senior consultants at itim international. They facilitate cultural training and consultancy to international companies. Lena and Javier are also facilitating open courses on "collaboration: Scandinavia and Spain". The next course is June 1st 2012 in Madrid. www.itim.org

*Writing this article we need to be aware that even though the Scandinavian countries seem very alike for an outsider, there are many cultural details which set them apart and Scandinavian collaborations have its share of cultural misunderstandings. However, for a Spaniard it can initially be difficult to spot these differences.