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NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF THE GLOBAL MARKET BEGINS WITH UNDERSTANDING THE PERSON ACROSS THE TABLE

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When it comes to closing a deal abroad, we consider every angle of the business opportunity. How does closing this particular deal augment our international market? Does the deal lie squarely within our market, or are we navigating new waters? How do we solidify our global branding in moving forward?

All this pondering and analysis is, of course, meaningless if the deal ultimately doesn't close. If the numbers are there, if due diligence has been adequately performed, if competent legal counsel has crossed every "T" and dotted every "I" what is the single most common cause of international deal breakdown? The answer is sadly simplistic – failure to know how the cultural make-up of your counterpart might influence the deal, an etiquette or protocol blunder sufficiently egregious to cause insult, or an unnecessary and unintended loss of credibility caused by overlooking a critical cultural nuance that caused your counterpart to judge you erroneously. Try answering the following basic question:

In Saudi Arabia, when invited to a social event by your host and his wife, in what manner would you greet and interact with them?

a. Shake the hand of your host assertively, lower your head and eyes and extend your hand to his wife. Proceed to follow up with business discussions

conducted earlier in the day.

b. Shake the hand of your host, kiss the left hand of his wife, and when asked what beverage you might like, order your choice of alcohol, but never a double

c. Shake the hand of your host. If you are introduced to his wife, nod to acknowledge her. Spend the evening establishing personal rapport and do not discuss business unless your host discusses it first.

*answer footnote

If you've checked your answer, and found that you answered correctly, you may be relatively savvy related to your colleagues across the globe as well as halfway to assuring that a cultural blunder doesn't extinguish your international business opportunity. The cultural nuances that affect a deal, or the successful management of an international team, however, go far beyond the ability to greet your international colleague. Issues related to the culture's time orientation, whether it is an individualist or collectivist society, space orientation, and power distance, not to mention conflict assumptions, use of eye-contact, body language and other non-verbal communication all affect understanding your colleague across the table as well as being understood.

One too many international deals have fallen apart on the basis of misunderstandings that could have easily been avoided by retaining a cross-cultural expert to advise a negotiation team or international manager. A ba-

sic example is as follow:

- You are American and negotiating with a Japanese colleague. You look him straight in the eye to demonstrate your integrity. He consistently avoids your gaze. You have misunderstood his avoidance as suspicious conduct warranting a complete re-investigation of his books. He has interpreted your direct gaze as disrespect.

Preparation by a trained expert related to these issues not only assures that unnecessary blunders will be avoided, it brings to each of us a personal knowledge that deepens our understanding of others thereby promoting acceptance, understanding, and dare I say, peace.

*Answer: Saudi Arabia is a conservative Muslim nation and it is entirely possible that you will socialize with your host without ever meeting his wife. However, if you are introduced to her, the safest greeting would be a nod. Touching her, even to shake hands would not be appropriate. Further, alcohol is generally prohibited in Saudi Arabia, and even in the odd event you were offered an alcoholic beverage, it would create unnecessary cultural distance by accepting it. Additionally, touching a person's left hand and using the left hand generally, is reserved for activities that take place in the restroom. Lastly, personal rapport is absolutely critical to any business deal, and in a social setting, attention should focus on that personal rapport and not on the sale.