

A management consultant talks about intercultural competence as a vital business skill for today's global workers.

Optional activity:

Listen to the interview, then for each question, select the best answer.

1. What does Penny Green specialise in?
A. Intercultural business promotions
B. Intercultural business relations
 2. What is one of the most important criteria in effective Intercultural competence?
A. Sensitivity to other cultures
B. Travelling to other countries
 3. In the United Arab Emirates why do some foreigners prefer meetings to be held in a hotel lobby?
A. There are a lot of people in the hotel lobby.
B. There are a lot of people going in and out of the office.
 4. In which countries would it be considered rude to accept a gift with only one hand?
A. Japan and Hong Kong
B. The Middle Eastern Countries
 5. Where should you never negotiate with your hand in your pockets?
A. Russia
B. Germany
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I: Interviewer **P:** Penny

I: Good morning, and on today's show we are going to be speaking to Penny Barrett, a Management Consultant specialising in intercultural business relations. She is going to be talking about intercultural competence which is a necessity when dealing in business in today's globalised society. Thank you for coming today Penny,

P: Thank you for having me

I: So can you start by telling us a little about what exactly intercultural competence is?

P: Well John, it's basically the ability to communicate successfully with people of other cultures. The world where we live and do business in is changing all the time and becoming more and more culturally diverse. Any international organization requires global knowledge, global attitudes, and global skills to remain effective in the future. The failure of a large majority of business ventures with other countries because of a "culture clash" is proof that we need more intercultural competence.

I: So what would you say is the most important criteria in this ability to communicate successfully?

P: One of the most important criteria which you must have in order to fulfil this competency is sensitivity to other cultures. This is certainly the case when you are working in international business.

I: Can you give us an example?

P: Yes of course. Let's take a look at different countries and their business practices, for example in the Middle Eastern countries. When holding business meetings in the United Arab Emirates, some foreign business people suggest holding the meeting in the lobby of an international hotel rather than in an office. The advantage of this is that there will be fewer people wandering in and out of the meeting. Also when in the Arab countries never cross your legs when sitting, as showing the bottom of your shoe or foot is offensive.

I: This is completely different from European countries such as Germany for example where I cannot imagine an important meeting being held in a hotel lobby! And talking about the Germans I would say that they are very punctual, when it comes to business.

P: Oh yes, absolutely. Germans are always extremely punctual; they have to arrive on time at a meeting. This is in contrast with Latin American countries, where arriving half an hour late at a meeting is normal!

I: So you ought to do you some research before you do business in another country.

P: Yes, of course, what is considered as rude in one place may be considered as polite in another. Let's take a look at giving gifts in different countries as another example. Some countries like Malaysia and Paraguay are so worried about corruption that they frown upon any gift that could be seen as a bribe. In Malaysia you shouldn't give a gift until you have established a relationship with the person. In Singapore, government employees are not allowed to accept gifts, and the United States limits any gift to the dollar value of \$25.

However, in some countries like Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines, exchanging gifts is a strong part of tradition. Part of the tradition is the gracious style used to present and receive them. Oh and in Asia and the Middle East you must only use your right hand, or both hands, to offer or accept a gift. Whereas in Japan and Hong Kong, you should use both hands.

I: So in this case effective intercultural competence is the ability to take into consideration the personal impact in interactions with colleagues and external contacts and adapting your behaviour appropriately.

P: Exactly. You need to be well informed about the other cultures, and open to learning more about them. Social mistakes do happen sometimes, but you must recognise that you have committed an error, and be prepared to change your ways. I myself once made the mistake of not removing my gloves when shaking hands with a business associate in Russia, without realising that this is considered impolite. Luckily the associate was very understanding and we laughed about it afterwards! Luckily I didn't have any pockets to keep my hands in whilst negotiating, you mustn't keep your hands in your pockets when negotiating in Russia, it is seen as extremely rude!

I: Well that certainly has given us a small but valuable insight into effective and ineffective intercultural competence. Unfortunately we've run out of time now, but are there any last things you would like to say.

P: Never make false assumptions about other cultures, and never lack sensitivity. Be open to learning about new cultures. If you are constantly doing business with, or travelling to, one country in particular, you ought to think about learning the language, you don't have to learn it fluently, but enough so you can communicate effectively in a range of situations.

I: Thank you Penny, it's been a pleasure having you here today.

P: Thank you.

Answer key: 1B; 2A; 3B; 4A; 5A.