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# THE YOUNG MANAGER HANDBOOKS

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by Oxford Training Solutions

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## MANAGING IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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A practical guide to effective  
communications across different cultures

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## CHAPTER ONE:

# The man with an ear on his chin

Returning home from work one evening in Singapore I noticed a young man as he entered the lift in my apartment building. He kept his eyes to the floor and stood on the left, close to the doors. He was unremarkable in Singapore; white shirt, black trousers, medium height and build, apart from the fact that he had no ear on the left side of his head, but had a vestigial ear, almost 2 cm long on the side of his chin.

When I asked colleagues the next day why a man in his early thirties would still have such a disfiguring feature when it seemed possible that it could have been surgically removed when he was a baby, I was quite unprepared for their answers.

My colleagues immediately said that this unfortunate man's parents would have consulted their fortune teller and taken his advice. If the fortune teller had told them the disfigurement was not significant and they would do no harm by having it removed, then they would have taken the child to a doctor. But, on the other hand, if the fortune teller had told them that by having this disfigurement the child would attract all the bad luck in the family to himself and thereby protect the other family members from any random misfortunes, then they would have left it alone. It would become his fate to go through his life as a human magnet for trouble.

Many of my colleagues agreed that if a similar misfortune happened to a child of theirs they would do exactly the same.

In western cultures people use the word 'fortunate' without much thought as to any deeper meaning. We wish people luck when they attempt something new and many magazines and papers publish daily horoscopes, but the concept of 'luck' is largely missing from western lives and certainly from western businesses. Yet in Asia it would not be unusual for a business, even a business as hardheaded as a bank, wanting to move into new premises to employ a *Feng Shui* expert to examine the place first, and if the *Feng Shui* was judged to be unfavourable and not easily remedied with colours, layouts or artefacts, then the move might be unlikely to go ahead.

This story of the man without an ear illustrates in a rather extreme way two of the essential differences between eastern and western cultures.

Firstly, there is the recognition of luck, of forces beyond personal control which might lead to success or failure, and secondly there is the much greater importance of a group than any individual.

In modern western cultures the individual ideal is seen as being in control of his or her own life. Phrases such as *"I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul"* (from *Invictus*), or *"Don't waste your energy trying to change opinions ... do your thing, and don't care if they like it."* (Tina Fey) summarise western attitudes to individual success. Iconic images of modern western culture would include the cowboys, rugged individuals with ties to no particular people or places, and the more recent heroes of the Die Hard movies. A lone individual confronting danger, making all his own decisions and consulting no-one.

In some non-western cultures these images and ideas are meaningless, or at best shallow. Fulfilment, satisfaction, a sense of achievement, vision and enjoyment all come from being part of a group or better, of many groups. Being a part of a family, a group of friends or a work team; being a citizen of a city and a son or daughter of a nation are all sources of pride and satisfaction, and the more overlaps between these groups, the better. These differences are reflected in the work culture and communications of a culture.

As a manager operating in more than one culture, awareness of these differences will impact on all areas of your work and ultimately on your success as a manager.

Recognising differences in ways of perceiving our world is not about encouraging old fashioned stereotypes of cultures, which are often used negatively, but about being aware of the common beliefs and shared values of a culture and the impact they have on any hierarchy, decision making structures and communication styles you might encounter in working in another culture.

Many people these days choose to reject stereotypes, believing that by treating each person they meet as an individual they will avoid the traps of putting people into boxes and making false value judgements. Although well intentioned, by neglecting to learn anything about the cultural patterns and beliefs of the new cultures they are interacting with they could be unwittingly treating, and misjudging every interaction by the norms of their own cultural background.

## **What is politeness?**

Here is a simple example of how a very basic interaction between two cultural groups completely failed to meet the expectations of group A, and left group B with a completely mistaken interpretation of the event.

A group of university students from Brazil decided to go to England for a month during their college vacation to study and improve their English language skills. Part of the immersion programme was for them to live with British families during their stay in the UK.

One cold, rainy evening two Brazilian students went to call on an Italian student they had become friendly with. When the host landlady opened the door she told them their friend

had gone out but should be home soon. She asked them if they would like to come inside and wait for him to come back. The Brazilians immediately replied “no, no, we are fine waiting here” and to their astonishment the landlady closed the door and left them in the rain.

If this interaction had been played out in Brazil the landlady would have understood that the students were simply displaying politeness and wanted nothing more than to get out of the rain, but social conventions demanded that they refuse the first offer so as to show respect. They would have had the full expectation that the landlady would repeat the offer once or twice more and finally insist that they come inside, at which point they would gratefully accept the offer. The students learned very quickly that the British politeness they had heard so much about operated very differently from the Brazilian version!

The landlady, on the other hand, could not understand why her offer had been rejected, and the students appeared to prefer standing in the rain to entering her house. To her, no meant no.

Before you move on to the next chapter where you will examine your own culture in more detail, how would your culture have handled either side of this interaction?