

Cultural Awareness Tips for HRD Professionals: Asian and Asian Americans

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In last month's issue of the CFCEXpress, I talked about the need for HRD professionals to always be aware of the culture and heritage of others in the workplace. Additionally, I provided some general characteristics related to the Hispanic, Latino and Chicano cultures. I also cautioned about generalizing and lumping all people with a common background together when interacting with them.

The following are similar characteristics for successfully interacting with people who have Asian and Asian-American backgrounds.

Asian/Asian American cultures:

Some shared values and characteristics by people with Asian heritage include:

- "Family" is important since many Asians typically value collectivism;
- Maintaining a low personal profile and working for the betterment of family or the group is important. This can sometimes be tied to face;
- In regards to group orientation, many Asians prefer terms like "we, us, and ours" to "I, me and mine;"
- Ranks and titles are important and used;
- Face, harmony and obligation are important elements in dealing with others. Doing things that cause someone else to be embarrassed, ridiculed or put in a lower position can damage a relationship with an Asian person;
- Time and the concept of hurrying to meet a deadline at the expense of disregarding others and what they value is a foreign concept;
- Religious affiliations often strong;
- Physical contact and facial expressions are often minimal. Patting someone on the back or putting an arm around someone's shoulder in the workplace is not typically done.
- Touch between strangers, especially those of the opposite sex) is frowned upon;
- The head is often considered the residence of the soul; therefore, touching a person's head potentially places them in jeopardy or invites evil;
- Personal cleanliness is valued and expected;
- Sitting with legs crossed and the soles of feet facing someone is considered rude and insulting in a number of countries since the foot is the lowest part of the body;
- Space between individuals is often at least six inches farther than what many Westerners consider comfortable;
- Some see animated expressions or gestures as a sign of a lack of control;
- Respect and humility are key cultural values. This is often demonstrated by avoiding direct eye contact or lowering eyes when talking; especially, to someone older or who is an actual or perceived superior (socially or in the workplace);

- Privacy is valued, especially among strangers. Discussions or inquiries regarding a person's occupation, income, politics, current events, controversial topics, family life, or spouse should be avoided. Any of these could potentially lead to disharmony or a loss of face;
- Trust is a crucial element in business. Before getting down to business, you will need to spend time (possibly months and numerous meetings) to establish trust before broaching negotiations or business topics;
- An indirect style of communication is often used, along with silence. For example, instead of saying "no" (which could cause someone to lose face) to a pushy sales person, an Asian customer might agree to purchase an item. They may later regret or resent the purchase and stop doing business with an organization;
- Facial expressions are often suppressed;
- Belching after a meal is often considered a show of satisfaction;
- Some people of this group use laughter or giggling to hide embarrassment, anger, sorrow, discomfort with a situation, or displeasure. A hand is often used to cover the mouth when laughing or giggling.

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