

INSIDE THE AMERICAN BUSINESS MIND

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Successful business isn't realized through mechanical acts of depositing sterile tokens into some steel-reinforced ROI calculating money machine that randomly applies a range of artificial risk values to keep investors from gaming the system. Even the stock market has more soul than that, with investors speculating about everything from natural disasters to national debt defaults. Real business is up close and personal—and because human decision is often time governed by random emotion, accented by desultory sprinkles of logic, a mild case of halitosis is enough to decimate a deal, especially in the U.S.A.

Having recently led a pre-MBA course for Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech's newly arriving international students, there are a couple of salient topics I touched on during that three-week workshop intensive that will be useful in bringing light to the American business mindset. (Students were attending this course in preparation for their MBA studies at Pamplin College of Business; According to <http://www.emba.pamplin.vt.edu/accreditation.html>, "Recent US News and World Report rankings include: Nationally ranked MBA program – #57 U.S. (ranked in the top 10% of over 500 accredited MBA programs in the US)".)

American Clean

While Americans are notorious for shedding business formal for casual dress whenever appropriate, there usually aren't exceptions when it comes to hygiene, unless you're doing business in the armpit-scented bohemian districts of places like San Francisco, California or Asheville, North Carolina. With the advent of "anti-bacterial" hand gel, wipes, and foams, American germaphobes are likely to apply multiple times throughout the day. It's even common to see germ killing dispensers outside grocery stores for easy decontamination. In a land where perfumes and colognes impart the fragrance of "spring-scented" laundry detergent, a trace of civet or ambergris on the lapel, or Limburger on the breath might be enough to sour relations. Let's not even talk about what happens if you come to a meeting sick with a cold, forgetting to respect the American body space rules.

Americans also prefer "clean" choices at the table as well. Because many business deals are made around cuisine, it's natural that international businessmen and women learn how to order in formal or informal settings, but beware of ordering items that might reveal your penchant for making a mess. Since the standard American menu comes with a relatively generic college town assortment of pizza, lasagna, burritos, spaghetti, hamburgers, fries, etc., avoid

choosing items you'll be tempted to manhandle with both hands, slurp, or squirt on your well-ironed threads. However, some executives have an obsession with culinary adventures, so don't be surprised to find yourself cross-legged before Middle Eastern cuisine. You probably don't need to worry about which hand to eat with as long as you don't spill the hummus.

Leadership & Teamwork

Americans have a reputation for being impulsive, creative, and direct. With what many might see as a protestant can-do swagger, Americans get the job done one way or another, with or without help. This single-minded, individualistic focus can be extremely daunting for other cultures.

A first conversation with an American business executive might only last minutes, with the first few lines of dialog being directly related to business. In a place where time is of the essence and everyone ticks to a New York minute, it doesn't take days of proposal review and relationship building to do a deal in the U.S. Hello, shake hands, and give the 2-3 minute elevator speech about why you should do business and how both parties gain, and that's it.

Once a deal is in motion, whether it involves product production, mergers and acquisition, or accounting audits, the organization should hum along with the efficiency of a high-order bee hive, or else. Or else? Unfortunately, there isn't much loyalty on the job floor; to friends, family, or business partners. Perform, or hit the exit. Teamwork is also important, but teams are composed of very ambitious individuals. If one isn't doing their part, there may be a meeting or two to warn the derelict to get with the game, but if no rehabilitation occurs, the underperformer will be weeded out, or reported.

This shrewd and sometimes crude approach to doing business is reflected in the American reality series where Donald Trump, who stars in *The Apprentice*, becomes famous for regularly shooting off two of what can be the most upsetting words in someone's career: "You're Fired!" Also, take for example, Jack Welch's vitality model which states that the bottom 10% of a company's workforce tends to be unproductive and should be fired.

Regardless of whether the world sees Americans as unsophisticated brutes or not, this "work hard or leave" philosophy has won relationship dependent company reorganization contracts around the world for American businessmen—who better to use to fire unproductive family and friends than an industrious, capitalistic American?!

These two afore-discussed subjects only scrape the surface of how the American business-neurons fire. There are myriad other important topics one should explore before undertaking U.S. business projects: American business slang and industry specific jargon, office politics, accounting transparency/checks and balances, punctuality, political correctness, negotiation strategy, financial best practices, contract law, HR policy development and implementation, regional influence on business, email / letter / proposal etiquette, etc.

With over 300 million citizens, and a rapidly evolving socially diverse DNA, it would be a huge mistake to assume that the customs and caveats of this ethnically porous nation can be learned from a book. Let the old adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” be a reminder that sitting down with an American business person for an hour over coffee is worth three weeks of flipping through boring business etiquette prose.

About the Author:

Jonathan Poston holds a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and a Masters degree in Entrepreneurship. He has led numerous advanced corporate-college level business and intercultural courses, conference, and workshops at organizations in China, Ecuador, Belize, and the U.S.A.

Host organizations have included Duke University, Virginia Tech-Pamplin College of Business, Government of Ecuador-Ministry of Productivity’s Innovation Conference, Galen University, LNU-MSU College of International Business, Universidad Espiritu Santo, and many more. Topics have included Social Media Marketing Strategy, Ecommerce, Global Marketing, International Negotiations, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, Creativity for Managers, U.S. Business Etiquette, Business English, Business Communications, Marketing Research, etc. etc.

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