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Poker-Face Meets Volcano: Invisible Force Fields and the Clash of Emotions in International Business

4-6 Minuten

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A significant yet under-researched area in intercultural business communication is the impact of our emotions on our business partners. The amount of emotion which is appropriate to show in a business context is highly influenced by our upbringings and — more than most would expect - our cultural programming.

Some of us are Poker-faces and some of us are Volcanoes. The Poker-faces have learned to keep their emotions to themselves, rarely if ever showing them in a work situation. For them, emotions are private. Indeed, being emotional in business is seen as a loss of self-control and damaging to their credibility.

The Volcanoes use the full range of their bubbling emotions and body language. They feel that showing their emotions strongly tells others about a matter's importance. Sending and receiving emotions are a natural part of their comfort zone.

Now imagine an international project team made up of Volcanoes and Poker-faces which has to cooperate closely on a long-term basis, usually under time pressure. When

emotions start percolating, a dangerous blind spot can arise if people are not aware of the potential for emotional culture clashes that can decrease the efficiency of teams and even destroy project success.

When temperatures rise, Poker-faces from say, Scandinavia and German-speaking lands, stay cool by focusing on the facts: the contract, delivery times, etc. Simultaneously, their Volcano counterpart from countries such as, for instance, Southern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, may pour forth their emotions in order to signal urgency and in an effort to build relationship bridges to their partners across the table.

Both sides are culturally sound in their behavior. Equally, both sides are not “getting” the other side’s communication style and each are sending confusing signals to the other. As they struggle to find a solution, they are confronted by an invisible force field which they can feel but not see, and which somehow prevents them from fully trusting the other side. This can be both confusing and frustrating.

What now? How do you stop this situation before it spins out of control, wrecking the team spirit? If you are a Poker-face, the solution is simple but complicated by fear. Your cultural context has taught you that revealing your emotions will often produce negative responses in others. You have learned that emotions have no place in business and can inflame passions which in turn block analytical solutions. To save the team, the Poker-faces should be prepared to crack open their protective armor a bit when engaged in global projects.

For Volcanoes, the solution is equally simple yet complicated by novelty. Usually they have little experience, — indeed an

inability — to suppress their emotions. This is because in their own culture, displaying feelings is highly positive and completely normal behavior.

In a nutshell, the simple part is that it would help if one side increased while the other side decreased the emotional intensity. Poker-faces have to keep in mind that for emotionally expressive cultures, there is a basic need to connect through their feelings with others. Volcanoes must be aware that strong emotions can be challenging and extremely uncomfortable to cope with for Poker-faces. The good news is, it is unnecessary to over-adapt because as soon as everybody is aware of the emotional discrepancy, the dispassionate, objective approach will not be misread as “coldness.” Similarly, emotional outbursts will not be misinterpreted as irrational exuberance.

Executives concerned with productivity will be delighted to discover that building teams which are consciously aware of the effect of our different ways of handling emotions can use this knowledge as a powerful tool to strengthen effectiveness and team cohesiveness. Multi-cultural cooperation will thus profit from an increased appreciation of the cool objectivity of Poker-faces without losing the momentum of emotional boosts from the highly effervescent Volcanoes. In this way, our emotions are the magnetic bond that binds international team members together and enables them to reach their highest levels of performance.