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The New Global Leader, Part XI: Karin van Auwera, Strengthening Cross-Cultural Bridges

5-7 Minuten

Karin van der Auwera's life and career epitomizes our intricately connected globalized world. Of mixed Serbian and German descent, she has lived, worked and studied throughout the USA and Europe. Her life-long mission is enhancing cross-cultural understanding, passionately driven by the thought that "living means continual learning." Author, game-designer, coach, public speaker and seminar leader, Karin thrives at the epicenter of international business understanding - and misunderstanding - opening and healing the hearts and minds of all who sit together at the global business table.

O'Brien: Karin, in your view, how can intercultural issues boost or kill your global career?

Karin: Well, let's start with the major career killers!

Cooperation is getting ever closer in international business, increasing the impact of interculturally incompatible working styles.

Let's take, for example, a highly qualified German employee who is their company's high flier - until s/he gets an American boss. US bosses might not really appreciate the German's

ultra-direct communication style, nor are they thrilled by German *Streitkultur* (argumentative culture) in meetings. In many cases, the German is quickly demoted - often completely blind to the dangers until it was too late.

A US American facing a German boss, on the other hand, might be rather shocked and confused to learn that criticism is dished out generously and none too diplomatically while praise is only given in homeopathic dosages - if at all. Without positive feedback, the US American might very well seek employment somewhere else where s/he feels more appreciated.

A major career booster in a global business context is to enhance your intercultural skills by discovering how others tick. Know what their business priorities are and navigate smartly around the traps.

O'Brien: In your opinion, do US firms understand and are fit to excel at international business success?

Karin: Europeans have a love-hate relationship with their American business partners. What they love about their American counterparts is their easy-going manner, positive approach, motivating energy, their fast reaction time, and that they are great team players.

Some complaints are: US Americans are often not aware about conditions in European and other foreign companies, assuming that things are more or less the same as at home. They feel Americans are uninterested or simply don't care. Also, non-native speakers of English sometimes feel overwhelmed by their counterpart's rhetorical skills and find it hard to squeeze in their point of view.

O'Brien: Intercultural "experts" often focus on what divides one business culture from another. In your experience, what links them? What do they share in common?

Karin: Well, for one thing, they all want to make a profit! When you dig deeper, though, you realize that even if the goals are similar, different cultures have their own unique path how to get there. Thus, assuming that all cultures are alike is a dangerous illusion. In real life, values often clash.

A status-oriented Asian manager, for instance, might feel insulted by the relaxed behavior of a Northern European business contact who — full of good intentions — simply follows the egalitarian ideals of his own culture. Even worse, if Western business people simply assume that their Indian colleagues have a similar attitude towards 'Intellectual property', they might be in for a devastating surprise.

O'Brien. Fascinating. So what are some other ways to destroy your international business?!

Karin [laughing]: Oh, there are many fun ways! You could, for example, keep doing things the way you've always done them - ignoring cross-cultural aspects - and keep plodding along in your own narrow business tunnel.

O'Brien: I understand. Tell me, are there any golden keys - cross-cultural business universals - that all global business leaders should know?

Karin: Yes. For one, we should all be more aware that our base assumption that we all have the same goals in business and that things will be seen and done similarly is naïve. Intercultural conflict points such as varying attitudes towards hierarchy, direct and indirect approaches, strict or relaxed

handling of timelines and a strong or weak focus on relationships have to be considered.

The real challenge is to understand what's going on in order to avoid the traps and find the underlying common ground.

O'Brien: Thank you, dear Karin, for sharing your insights and expertise concerning cross-cultural understanding.

Karin: I thank you for allowing me to share my experience with your readers. In a nutshell, we all have our blind spots when interpreting our business partner's behavior. In international business it pays —-literally! — to take the time to listen carefully to your counterpart to see if what you are hearing is actually what they mean. Thus you'll have a good chance to find out where the other person is coming from and to proceed together successfully from there. And as many cultural clashes are invisible and pop up unexpectedly, it is always wise to get as much background information as possible before entering a new culture.