



**everyone knows**

## INTRODUCTION

To understand a culture, you must understand its values. Americans in business, are, thankfully, a straightforward group, especially helpful when trying to work out what makes them tick. True to the national constitution, there are three things held dear in pursuit of the almighty business deal: life (read: having fun at work), liberty (read: having control and freedom over the work we do) and the pursuit of happiness (read: money).

What is astounding is the consistency of the business values in the US today – stable for the past few decades – flavoured and integrated with the national values and cultures brought by the waves of immigrants starting their new lives in the country.

Everyone in the US knows that “time is money”, everyone knows that you’ve got to “speculate to accumulate”, and everyone knows that “the early bird gets the worm”. Everyone also knows that what enables these activities and business achievements to be open to anyone is the value Americans place on equality, freedom and the meritocratic distribution of the fruits of their labours.

## WHAT YOU’LL LEARN

- ➔ There are a variety of values and attitudes which you should be aware of when considering the ways business is conducted in the US, some of which are laudatory, some of which are unattractive.
- ➔ By learning what “everyone knows”, you can more quickly understand your American counterpart and link your business propositions to what they value, and therefore be more confident and prepared in your negotiations.

## Situation

You've been working since 6:30 this morning in that climate-controlled office, and you can't wait to grab a decent lunch. Shouting down the hall for you is your colleague Bob, who says "why don't we go to lunch now? I could murder a pastrami on rye, how about you?" Bounding out of your chair, you head together to the nearby deli, sit down at the leatherette booth only to be barked at by the surly waiter. "You can't sit here – I'm not workin' this station today!" After moving tables to where the waiter points you, and finishing the sandwich, Bob leaves a \$5 tip. "That's a bit excessive don't you think, given his attitude?" you remark. Bob shrugs and says "yeah, but you never know. He might be my boss one day – what goes around comes around!"

## Explanation

### **Anything is possible**

Americans generally believe that if you really want to pursue a business idea, it's possible to make it happen, and it's even possible you'll make good money trying. How will you recognize this? Because no matter how ludicrous an idea you present to your American boss or colleagues, it'll be given time and treated with respect. And we know from the history of business successes in the US (look at the success of pet rocks about 15 years ago, and 3M's Post-It™ notes), some of the wackiest ideas really make it to the big time. The downside of this positive and optimistic outlook however, is that those who raise concerns or reservations are sometimes viewed as negative, destructive and unhelpful. Tact and well-structured, objective arguments against will go a long way towards avoiding this perception.

# *Americans generally really want to pursue it's possible to*

## **Competition**

There is a shared understanding that competition raises the stakes of the game, and that winning brings sweet rewards. It is akin to playing tennis with a better player because you know you rise to their level. American business language often looks to competitive sports for its inspiration: slam dunk, home run, left field. The love of rankings is an indicator too of the spirit of competition that exists in the business world: The Fortune 100, The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, The Best Bosses, The Best Business Schools.

## **Information is free**

Telephone any American company for your market research exercise, and they'll usually not only answer your questions, but also route you to additional information sources. You're unlikely to be asked why you want to know, and you won't be grilled about who you are or any ulterior motives you might have. Most American companies know that if *they* don't tell you the information about themselves, you *will* find the information elsewhere – such as via the internet – and at least if you've gained the information from them, they are controlling the messages and the content. This openness and lack of suspicion comes

# *believe that if you a business idea, make it happen*

from the belief that it's not what you know or who you know, it's how you've used what you know. In Europe, on the other hand, companies are highly suspicious of the motives of any researcher or enquirer (and even customers!) since power is derived from what you know and who you know it from.

## **Liberty and justice for all**

This phrase, recited daily in American classrooms as part of the “pledge of allegiance”, reflects the meritocratic, “all men are created equal” ethos that runs through the business culture. People really do believe that even those from the most humble beginnings can become business success stories – a belief which is reinforced regularly by the appearance of rags to riches stories in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune* and *Business Week*. Which partly explains why everyone's ideas and opinions count – because you don't know from where the next “killer app” might come. Calling the boss by her first name, wearing the same “smart casual” attire as the post room clerk, washing up your own coffee cup regardless of your job title, not listing academic qualifications on business cards are all indications of the value placed on equality at work and the desire for

equal treatment. It's even possible your boss is significantly younger than everyone else in the company (Steve Jobs from Apple, Jeff Bezos at Amazon, Bill Gates at Microsoft).

### **A win/win approach**

This is one of the best and most productive approaches to most business opportunities, since it works on the basis that both parties to a business deal emerge victorious. The rules of the American business game are clear: make as much money as you can, as fast as you can. This game theory approach perhaps comes from the economics of abundance rather than the economics of scarcity and invasions, so well known in Asia and Europe. It's apparent in the language of business negotiations, with phrases such as "how can we both make this work?" and "we're really excited about working with you on this!" The downside of this approach, however, is the assumption by Americans in business that cash is the universal motivator and language of business. Appreciating that in most business cultures with whom Americans work, winning is measured in more rounded ways (such as social inclusion, access to exclusive information) is not one of the stronger skills of US business people.

### **Live to work**

Generally, your occupation defines who you are in the US, and gives you a branding and positioning despite your best efforts. Renowned for the 60 hour week, Americans in the world of business relish the satisfaction that comes from a good day's work – a sort of cleansing of the spirit, answering that Puritan calling. One way you can recognize this tendency towards overachievement is by the display of trophies, diplomas, sports medals and awards in the offices of your US colleagues, demonstrating their love of work and reinforcing the

ethos that hard work pays off. Another clue is a recent statistic that 83 per cent of US office workers who went on a summer holiday for a week or more stayed in touch with their offices while away, usually by phone or e-mail.<sup>1</sup>

### **Transactions rule**

Doing the deal is more important than building relationships and getting to know the other parties to the deal. This is apparent when beginning negotiations with your American colleagues who may neglect to offer you tea or coffee – since the transaction is foremost in their mind. The small talk that comes with relationship building is usually saved for the end of the negotiations. After all, “time is money”, and transactions not only give more immediate rewards (a high return on time), they also deliver short-term positive commercial results at a faster pace than do relationships. Which is at odds with the usual American focus on all things to do with the future.

### **Young at heart**

The aspiration to look and stay young can be seen in a general enthusiasm for attending training programmes and learning new and better ways of doing the job, regardless of age. The erosion of a mandatory retirement age demonstrates that many companies increasingly want employees to stay until they no longer wish to work. Encouraging this practice is the Department of Social Security, which increases payments if workers stay in employment until the age of 70. Even the corporate hospitality events of US companies are youthful: hot air ballooning, white water rafting, outdoor adventure trips, rather than the opera, ballet and boating events which many European companies favour.

<sup>1</sup> Accenture, “Study of US employees staying connected on vacation”, August 2000

# *The attitude towards of doing business is*

## **Insular**

In part because the number of weeks allowed for annual holidays in the US is low relative to other countries (4–6 weeks in Europe), true insights, empathy and understanding of other national and business cultures is very weak. The negotiating power and confidence of non-Americans when striking a deal with a US partner is underpinned by the simple fact that they are likely to know less about your country and business culture than you already know about theirs – partly as a result of the pervasive distribution of American TV, films and books (remember Michael Douglas’ character, Gordon Gecko, in the film *Wall Street*?). The attitude towards non-American ways of doing business is generally intolerant: “That’s different, so that’s wrong. It’s not the way we do it at home.” Speaking languages for business other than English and possibly Spanish is extremely rare, and most Americans in business who do venture to foreign climes seek out local and familiar destinations: US hotel and car rental chains and US food chains. It’s borne from the belief that anything you could possibly want materially is already found in America, so why look elsewhere? Tip for your next US meeting: bring a map of your region and show your colleagues where your London and other offices are, explaining that the region is not like a United States of Europe but rather richer for its histories and cultures.

# *non-American ways generally intolerant*

## **Welcoming**

Despite the insularity of Americans in business, their openness, informality, optimism, humour, curiosity and friendliness instantly puts most people at ease. This is especially helpful when coming from business cultures with steep class hierarchies and formal rituals. Humour is a tool subconsciously used to relax the mood and build an atmosphere of friendliness and informality. Because of the belief that anything is possible in American business, this optimism carries over to your relationship too: the glass will be half full rather than half empty. Don't be surprised if your colleague suggests that the "problems" you foresee are actually "opportunities".

## **Ethical**

Because the business culture (and national culture) values each person as a unique individual, the idea that any supplier or customer should get unusual preferential treatment is totally unethical and considered bad practice. US companies and business people are shocked by offers of bribes or kickbacks – since that would be rigging the rules of the game, and the rules apply to everyone. Even the practice of cause related marketing (companies doing good works in their communities) has gained momentum in the past few years as a

result of the fashion for fair play and the ethics of giving something back to the community that helped create your success.

### **Masculine**

In a recent study by culture guru Hofstede,<sup>2</sup> the US ranks 15th out of 50 as one of the more masculine cultures, with Japan at the top of the charts, and Sweden the most feminine. The value placed on personal achievement, challenges, material possessions which display the achievements, and the direct/assertive communication style all support this finding. Unlike many Asian and Latin cultures, the US does not have the masculine concept of “saving face”. The results orientation and emphasis on decisive action often makes the US business culture unfriendly for women, who are inherently nurturers and relationship builders. However, in order to retain their large pools of female talent US companies are trying to nurture more feminine environments by adopting a more co-operative style and developing an awareness of lifestyle issues.

### **WORDS TO LIVE BY**

- “” If it ain't broke don't fix it. **Bert Lance, member of Jimmy Carter's cabinet, 1977**
- “” A life spent in making mistakes is not only more honourable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing. **George Bernard Shaw**
- “” The cream always rises to the top.
- “” What goes around, comes around.
- “” Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. **Vince Lombardi, coach, Green Bay Packers football team**

<sup>2</sup> *Cultures and Organizations*, p. 84