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Thinking Like a Turk: Five Professional Lessons from Five Years in Istanbul

March 11th, 2016

[**Cultural differences**] have a lot of impact on business. Understanding how your counterpart is key to success. However, explaining the main cause and possible implications of such differences is always a challenge. This is why we are fortunate to have Michelle Haskin's thoughts here. Michelle worked as a business development manager for a global law firm's Istanbul office. She currently lives in USA. But we find her observations still accurate and valuable. With Michelle's permission, we share her insight on the cultural side of doing business in Turkey.

After working as a legal business development professional for over five years in Istanbul, Turkey, I came away with these five lessons, which are applicable around the world.

1. **Relationships are key**. I regularly see articles on LinkedIn with instructions about how to network, but Turks just do it naturally. If a Turk meets someone at a conference, they follow up with coffee. They don't wait to close a deal before having dinner with a client; they schedule something periodically to catch up. To a Turk, everyone from students to fellow volunteers at an NGO could be a key professional contact in the future. This extends to colleagues; Turks expect to be friends with their coworkers, and I regularly met my coworkers' families through work and social events. Since relationships are at the heart of Turkish society, it is no surprise that Turks seamlessly extended this philosophy to the business world.

2. **Coalition building gets things done**. Though this lesson should apply to any workplace, it was especially evident in Turkey. A strict professional hierarchy and sheer exhaustion (Turks work the longest hours in the [**OECD**]) combine to ensure that coworkers won't take an idea seriously unless there is some serious weight behind it. Even if you have the professional clout to implement changes unilaterally, to truly change habits and attitudes, you need a broad coalition of supporters. This lesson was perfectly illustrated by the evolution of the diversity committee at my second office. I was one of the founders, but the committee grew to encompass people from nearly all seniority levels. After one year, surveys consistently revealed that people were proud of the office's commitment to diversity and our efforts were starting to get noticed beyond the firm. This success would not have been possible without a broad base of support for the committee and its efforts.

3. Listen to what people say and how they say. Turkish culture values honor, and Turks will do nearly anything to save face or avoid saying no. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to subtle cues that indicate that a person is uncomfortable, unable, or unwilling to do something that they have already agreed to do. While an American might come right out and say, **"**No, that isn't my job**"** or **"**I don't have capacity for that at the moment,**"** a Turk would say **"**I would be happy to help you,**"** but then you will be left waiting for a month without a response. Confronting the Turk with blunt accusations will not only damage the relationship (which, as you can see from point #1, is a career killer) but it will not lead to any better results. Instead, take the time to understand the person's capabilities, constraints, and attitude up front by paying attention to their body language and enthusiasm. Then, don't force them to respond immediately with a yes/no answer. Putting people into difficult positions to accommodate your expectations does not lead to results.

4. Do your due diligence. Closely linked to the point above; doing your due diligence is critical in making sure that you don't end up with a miscommunication or disappointing service. I often worked with other foreigners in Turkey who had a desire to rush decision-making processes or trust the companies whose brochures contained the least amount of English grammatical errors. I learned this lesson the hard way when I arranged for my company to make a donation to an extremely well-known Turkish charity, only to find out the week prior to our big event that the founder was convicted of fraud. Tapping into the network that Turks maintain so well for referrals, references, and advice is essential before committing to a long term professional relationship.

5. Trust yourself and others will too. When I moved to Turkey, I was a fresh college graduate who didn't speak a word of Turkish or understand the culture, much less the business environment. I sent my CV to every law firm listed in the Legal 500, and found a job that jump started my business development career with an amazing group of coworkers. From there, I moved to managing the business development department of one of the top international law firms in Turkey. Despite being a foreigner, a woman in a country where only 35% of women participate in the workforce, and under 30 in a country where seniority is highly respected, I made a place for myself in my company and in Turkey. Though I must attribute most of my success to the support of my family, friends, and mentors; I have to admit that sheer determination and a healthy dose of self-confidence played a role. If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will either.

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