

Russians and Chinese at The Negotiation Table by *Lina Kolesnikova*

Although much negotiating calls for rational judgments and scheming in the choice of tactics and ploys, the parameters of decision-making are strongly cultural. The levels of trust and distrust, of belief in the manipulability of events, of confidence in considering all contingencies, and the like are all matters that are fundamentally set by the particular culture. When the cultural gap between parties is too great, the "logic" of tacit negotiations cannot prevail. Whereas the differences between Russians and Chinese may not always seem so great, in many situations the gap is enough to cause misunderstandings.

Many specific characteristics of Chinese practices stand in sharp contrast to typical Russian approaches, such as the strive for very long negotiations of the Chinese, confronting the eagerness of Russians to complete the work and to proceed with personal interests. A Russian negotiating team is often composed of veterans or experts who are very experienced, and therefore, are very quick in understanding the topic and jumping over to conclusions. Chinese negotiation teams are often large, may include a number of people not specifically knowledgeable about the topic, and move step by step in a slow and repetitious unhurried manner.

Both Russians and Chinese are suspicious to foreigners and particularly to each other because both countries have had quite unpleasant pages of common history. The desire to be seduced by the outside world raises feelings of shame and thereby complicates calculations of the negotiations.

Russians like to be praised as a nation but the general perception of personal compliments from strangers, as often used by the Chinese, is very negative. It is considered as phoney and cunning.

The Chinese style to avoid any hard talk and not to say "no" may seriously irritate Russians who prefer to have a more "ordinary" way of negotiations. Blunt in speech, Russians prefer more direct communication. For the Chinese, this may create a loss of face, which they cannot accept.

Russian senior officials do the talking because only individuals strongly involved in the business attend the negotiations. The Russian side cannot understand "silent" officials. It is quite common for Russians to have younger negotiators with older subordinates. Large negotiations team is also not typical for Russians, but is often the case with Chinese, including team members marginally involved in the business being discussed. The Chinese way of speaking can also be a problem for Russians. Vague definitions and circumvolution of negotiations can be difficult.

Russians need to see the other party's human side – emotions, hopes, aspirations etc. For Russians it is important to like the people they are dealing with. But the Chinese prefer not to show their personal feelings. Russians often consider Chinese as “faceless people”.

Not many Russians are fond of foreign cuisines; the same is true for the Chinese. It is very difficult to persuade both sides on this point. For Russians, certain rituals are important, for example, vodka drinking, while for the Chinese this contradicts their usual lifestyle.

The sense of humour is very different (not surprisingly). Russians adore to joke about government, politicians of the past, mother-in-law, adultery and etc. Obviously the Chinese cannot accept such jokes with their Confucian values. The Chinese in turn, like to use animals and their features as metaphors which can be offensive to the Russians, as references to certain animals may imply a different meaning to them.

Chinese psychology praise compromise as a way to achieve harmony, while Russians regard willingness to compromise as a sign of weakness, and may adopt hard talk in an attempt to achieve better results.

Russians generally believe that human relations cannot stand still. If they are not being reinforced and hence progressing toward greater intimacy, they will stagnate and wither. The Chinese accept that relations can remain on the same level for indefinite periods of time. What they want is a sense of reliability, not just greater warmth.

The examples cited above and many others clearly demonstrate that understanding and appreciating cultural differences and sensitivities in negotiations can be a make it or break it factor. No where is it more evident than with two strong cultures as the Chinese and the Russian ones.

Lina Kolesnikova CS&A Associate

Published In CS&A Newsletter- Autumn 2007 – issue 1