

CULTURE

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Sources : What, according to yourself is the connection between culture and the company ?

Robert Vazille : This is a question which when asked is both surprising and challenging. There is no direct connection between culture and the company. Although...

- If one takes « culture » to mean knowledge about a variety of subjects which enrich those who have it, then each company becomes an exceptional foundation for the development of the culture of each of its employees

- If culture means the acquiring of knowledge which prepares one to optimistically face a not always easy but passionate future, the relationship between « culture » and « the company » is to be regarded as one of the most potentially enriching processes in one's professional life.

Sources : Does internationalism rhyme with culture ?

R.V. : Of course ! One can even say that in this case it is about difficult culture, acquired on the job, whilst confronted with the reality of an international economy whose actors are in a seriously competitive context. In fact, one must acquire the know-how and an expert understanding of the approach of ones international partners in the world of business, during negotiations, at the workplace and when elaborating projects. One should also master the conflicts between one's personal and one's professional projects. This represents important cultural progress and a strong impact which are as interesting for the company itself as they are outside of it. Culture also comes into play when one needs to sell products and services abroad. Managers whose job it is to prospect should have training about the culture of their targeted company.

Sources : As a privileged partner of the Japanese, what is your approach with regards to « Culture and the company » ?

R.V. : An anecdote comes to mind. When FRANCOLOR was acquired by the Japanese, I bought a dozen books about Japan and its culture and put them in a prominent position in my office. When the President of the Japanese group came to visit for the first time, he said «You know, we are just people, like any other. Whatever our culture we have the same backgrounds and the men we deal with are similar to ourselves » This is of course true ! Nonetheless, thirty people from our company followed a period of training with a specialist on Japanese culture. In particular, they learned about the importance of the Samurai culture and how to recognise its essential values, the most important being quality. Learning notions of the language is also important even though English is very often used over there. Many written, oral and personal contacts are necessary in order to immerse oneself into Japanese culture. Working with partners such as the Japanese means teamwork and thus radical changes in the world of individual work even if autonomous work is not excluded. Personally, working with people of different cultures has made me more tolerant, more open-minded. Mutual learning by both countries is obligatory because the way each company works is very different. Japanese reactions to everyday life are also very different. I remember one day in Brussels, when a Japanese colleague was very unhappy because he had bought a television, which although made in Japan, had instructions in Dutch and not in Japanese.

Personally, I have expressed a vivid interest in the Japanese culinary, literary and theatrical culture and even in the Buddhist religion.

My interest started out as professional, but quickly became personal. By being in direct contact with the people one can have a more in depth idea of their culture

Sources : Do you have a specific example of the difference between Japanese company culture and our own ?

R.V. : A constructive example is that of time management. As the debate about the 35 hour working week takes place in France, the Japanese arrive in their office at 8am after having spent 1 1/2 hours on the train. They leave at 6pm and accompany their visitors to the restaurant and then return to the office until 10pm and then take the train again. They have an impressive ability to work and a permanent wish to study. They are very gifted for quality related issues even though they have some problems in being concise.