

## Blowing Your First Meeting with Chinese Businessmen

If you are like many typical Americans meeting with Chinese executives for the first time, you could be clueless about some fundamental cultural differences.

You are happy they speak some English, so you naturally call up your well-honed social skills developed in Western cultures. Within an hour of the get-acquainted session, you have exchanged info about your professional backgrounds plus a lot more. You've shared info about your personal life, wife and kids, vacations, hobbies, etc. But you may not be aware of the sparse answers you get back in return. You don't notice because your Chinese friends seem genuinely interested in what you are telling them so you go on and on. You are proud that you are developing such close personal rapport with them.

In reality, they are bored and maybe slightly annoyed with all that personal stuff. However, they are polite and humor you so you are clueless. Also, they don't share much of their own personal information. Their wife and kids are personal topics and not loosely shared with business associates, especially new ones. They look at the pictures of your kids politely but do not show you any of their own. One exception when they might bring up their kids is if they are trying to move them into a US school and they think you might have some guidance on this subject.

At *their*

business meetings, Chinese executives are accustomed to chatting about hobbies and prominent places visited *for business*.

Therefore, they would be comfortable if you talked about these subjects. Be aware, however, travel destinations discussed are not family vacation destinations but locations of important business gatherings. An analogy in the US would be conversation starting with: "Have you ever attended conferences out in Hilton Head?" Or, "I really dread those trade shows in Las Vegas – it's such a zoo!"

Certain hobbies and sports are good topics to bring up as you may find a common bond, such as golf, poker, chess or whatever. Note that these are hobbies and avocations that do not bring your family into the picture. Don't talk about how you and your family went camping and hiking in Yosemite since they are not ready to share info about their own family vacations.

Chit chatting about the right topics, along with the business talk directly related to your meeting, will help start building a good relationship. Be advised, however, Americans talk at their normal Type A speed, not sensing the other side is barely comprehending a fraction of the words. The American may feel the Chinese is a somewhat quiet, introverted listener when in reality he is just shy about speaking English at all, let alone at the ferocious speed of the American.

Another difference in culture: Americans cannot tolerate silence in meetings; someone will always jump in to fill the space – check it out at any US meeting. For the Chinese and Asian in general, there can be periods of silence and contemplation during a meeting. The group allows individuals to quietly digest and think about the last statements; there is no urgency to fill the silence. Americans often cannot handle their 20 or 30 seconds of silence and feel compelled to jump in with a disrupting comment.

Stay on topic, speak slowly, tolerate silence and give others a chance to I talk – very simple rules to a successful start of a relationship. And I say Start, because one meeting is not enough.

In fact, the objective of the first meeting or two, or three, is not to close a deal, or is it even a preliminary step to doing a deal. Despite the business talk, the objective is just to feel each other out to see if there can be a personal bond. Without a meaningful bond, there can be no business deal worth anything. That leads into another Blog on when and how deals are closed.

By Alex Cheng, with inputs from Sam Lin and Jenny Mahler.