

Cross-Cultural Communications

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This column deals with cross-cultural issues. Topics covered will include teaching culture through language, cross-cultural communication in business environment and cross-cultural communication in academic settings. Any suggestions are welcomed. Please contact Elena Denisova-Schmidt (elena.denisova-schmidt@unisg.ch)

Who is the *американский друг* ‘American friend’?

An American engineer, John, who has been involved in a long-term project dealing with some suppliers in Russia, gets a new position in his company and starts working on a new assignment in one of their Western European offices, namely in Paris. Russian companies are not a part of his job duties anymore. Within a few weeks, he receives email and messages on his answering machine from one of his former Russian colleagues. The Russian engineer, Sergey, is planning to go on a business trip to Paris and would like to visit John's new house.

John does not even reply to his emails and telephone calls. He does not want to invite any former business associates to his house. He does not see any point in socializing with a person whose contacts will not benefit him anymore. His successor, Mike, who coordinates collaboration with Russian companies now, tells him that Sergey wants to find out his address and his private phone number in Paris, and wants to meet his *американский друг* ‘American friend’ very much.

However, Sergey comes to Paris. The meeting did not take place, and Sergey is very disappointed. He could imagine that he has done something ‘wrong’ and it is a particularity of ‘US-American mentality’. But he couldn't understand it and does not want to accept it. This adversely affects his cooperation with John's successor, Mike. All the jobs that used to be completed within a few days— e.g. working out and approving procedures, making amendments to internal specifications, answering emails — now take months or do not happen at all.

Why did this happen?

For Sergey:

A trip abroad (for vacation or for business) is still uncommon for financial (not everyone can afford it) or procedural (passport, invitation, medical insurance, visa, etc.) reasons. Until recently, it has been something unusual and special. Russians prepare for such a journey beforehand. In addition, Russians have a special relationship with France, and the French way of life: fashion, cinema, language and literature and particularly Paris itself. In Russia it is said: *Увидеть Париж и умереть* (‘Visit Paris and die’).

In Russia, professional relationships are very often closely associated with private relationships — or, it is better to say, professional relationships are successful when the private relationships are good as well. If colleagues are working together for a long period of time, they often spend their weekends and vacations together. They might invite each other to their homes and they always have time for one another. A colleague can become very often and quickly a friend.

For John:

For the American it means that socializing, which took place during the close cooperation in Russia (the common dinners, long discussions, boating, visiting Russian saunas), was just a part of business, and now he does not want to do it voluntarily. He is not responsible for Russian companies anymore. He didn't always enjoy some of the particularities of Russian festive meals: the abundant food and beverages, the numerous toasts, the necessity of drinking up to the bottom, the inevitable drinking competitions, and so on almost every day. Additionally, many American

companies do not allow social activities outside of work between employees and suppliers, especially if one person is paying for things for the other. It can be seen as a conflict of interest and can even be illegal in the United States.

But Sergey does not know that, and therefore he is disappointed with his *американский друг* ‘American friend’ and concludes now that ALL Americans are unreliable and bad friends.

Consequences for the future cooperation between Sergey's and John's companies:

The Russian company doesn't supply their products in time and the American company should always be prepared with a Plan B. The Russian company should pay compensation or arrange delivery by plane instead of by ship, which raises the cost, but Sergey doesn't care. Having been a production director in a large corporation for many decades, he has learned how to avoid taking responsibility and hide the real reason behind these ‘technical problems’.

The lesson learnt: Personal relationships are an absolute must when doing businesses in Russia!

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