Need to be culturally competent

Cross-cultural consultant Marie Tseng enlightens ***Aneeta Sundararaj*** *on the importance of understanding cultures for better communication and interaction*

THE average Malaysian will walk into the office, head for his/her desk, switch the computer on and start reading emails. At most, he/she will say "Good morning" to three people: A secretary, a colleague and the boss.

"The French can't understand this. In France, everyone greets each other and shakes hands. The women will kiss each other on the cheek," says Marie Tseng, 45, an expert in cross-cultural competencies.

The first scenario is common in companies that rarely focus on diversity and cross-cultural training for their employees. In her boutique consultancy, Cultural Impact, which focuses on cultural diversity, Marie has come across many people who think that if we've been exposed to people of different backgrounds, we're culturally competent.

The reality is that people don't understand the essential role that culture plays in how well we communicate and interact with one another. To illustrate, she gives the following example: "A foreign client was at a party when a Malaysian guest said to him, 'You must come and visit. I live in Petaling Jaya. Drop by my house'.

Marie Tseng

Like most Europeans, my client took this as an invitation. When he called to fix a time to visit, the other person said something like, 'My house is hard to find'. The European replied, 'Don't worry. I'm great with the GPS. I'll find your house'. He didn't realise that the invitation wasn't actually an invitation."

Laughing, she adds: "He doesn't know that sometimes, Malaysians will say 'yes, yes, yes', when they mean 'no'."

On another occasion, another client had difficulty with the local perception of time. "He couldn't understand why his tennis coach hadn't turned up for his lesson. The coach hadn't called to cancel. When they next met, the coach said nothing, as though nothing had happened.

"When I asked my client if he had sent a text message to reconfirm the appointment, he looked surprised and asked me, 'Why should I reconfirm? I had already fixed the appointment'."

Marie explains: "In Europe, when an appointment is set, it's set. There's no need to reconfirm, even if the appointment was made six months earlier. If you cancel, you better have a good reason for doing so. As for my client, I advised him to reconfirm lessons in future."

What about Malaysians? Do we understand other cultures easily? Marie cites the example of Malaysians who go to Europe for the first time and find themselves alone and feeling lost. "Malaysians will often go out of their way to help foreigners. In Europe, they'll see you as an adult, a capable adult who should be able to find your way. So if you don't ask for help, they assume you don't need help," she says.

This inability or, perhaps, the reluctance to ask for help has resulted in many Malaysians spending years abroad, socialising and fraternising only with other Malaysians and not anyone else.

In the workplace, multinationals often send someone from the head office in Europe to show a Malaysian counterpart how things work. She's had European clients who say that since the Malaysian remains quiet, smiles and asks no questions, the European assumes he does not understand him. So he explains the same things over and over again.

Marie is aware that the Malaysian is probably not accustomed to asking questions and merely smiles in response. Amused, she adds: "The smile becomes wider and wider, but, inside, he's probably thinking, 'You're so thick, I don't even want to tell you how arrogant you sound'."

The lesson here, she says, is that both parties need to understand where the other is coming from and each party needs to explain the way they do things. A good example she gives was when she asked a group of Malaysians their definition of a good manager. "They said a good manager is someone who shows he cares and is a good person. I told some clients in France this and they said, 'Who cares if you're a good person? You're here to do a job. If you're good at what you do, you're a good manager'."

The rationale for this difference, says Marie, is religion. "In France, more than 30 per cent are atheist. Here, this number is less than one percent."

She goes so far as to extend the French national motto of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" to include *Laicite*, which broadly translates into secularism. However, strong religious beliefs here reinforce the idea of "togetherness".

"Here, there is a 'we' culture. Most people feel the need to belong to a group. This group can be a school group, a group within a company or even ethnicity." By extension, it is possible to equate a good person with one who is religious as well. "The French," she adds, "are more individualistic and often say, 'I can do whatever I want as long as I take responsibility.'"

She admits that it is hard to have one's beliefs challenged and recalls the time her husband challenged the concept of equality. "I thought it was almost blasphemy for him to say that we're not all equal. As time passed, I came to see that, in a practical and realistic sense, we may not all be equal. It all depends on how you define words such as respect, hierarchy and so on. These are culturally-loaded terms. And culture is the collective programming of the mind."

To demonstrate, she refers to a world map. "We're programmed to think that Europe is up and Australia is down. Invert the map. What happens? You'll see that Australia is up and Europe is down."

That said, are things changing here? Are we becoming a more egalitarian society? Marie's answer is telling: "I hear it but I don't see it. There is a greater desire for equality. But, in the family, Dad will still decide what's best. In the workplace, my clients still say, 'All are equal until we're not and we don't know when the 'we're not' is going to happen'."

Overall, she feels that "we may not be able to change the various cultures we come across, but we cancertainly make an effort to understand them. Then, we can find a way that fits everyone and move forward".

Understanding culture plays an ***essential role*** *in how well we communicate with each other.*

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Step 4: Send your photo to clickandgo.contest@gmail.com by midnight, Feb 22, midnight 2013.
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