

Doing Business in Dubai

I: Today we're going to talk about intercultural competence. Our first guest in the studio is Ayman Razak. Good morning, Ayman.

A: Good morning, Linda.

I: First of all, could you explain your international background. What is it?

A: I worked for an international company in London, based in London, and following that, moved to the Middle East, to Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.

I: What kind of company were you working for in London?

A: I was working for a large media company called Emap. A large listed media company.

I: Now one thing that I've been wondering about is what kind of cultural differences you experienced in business, moving from London to Dubai.

A: There were a few differences. I'd say the most noticeable was the pace — the pace of life and the pace of the business community. When we moved into Dubai, things moved more slowly. And when you set a meeting for 9 o'clock in London, you could be sure that both parties would be there at 9 o'clock or five minutes before. However, in Dubai, you had to have a bit more flexibility and you may turn up for a meeting and the person you're meeting could be half an hour late. But that was just part of the culture.

I: And that wouldn't be considered discourteous?

A: No, not at all. It wasn't discourteous; it was common practice. In fact, it was just... The meeting would be professional once it started. It was just that you must accept that sometimes people would be half an hour, one hour late, or even a little more than that.

I: Did people apologize or was it just normal? You'd just turn up late.

A: Well, it was almost as if nothing had happened. The meeting would just go ahead. The greetings would be as usual.

I: Okay. Are there many business women there, or was it mostly men?

A: There's a very well established equal opportunities policy throughout the emirate. And in fact in government, a number of the ministers in key positions — the Minister of Finance, for example, is a woman.

I: Are there any problems in terms of customs or shaking hands or greeting? What about with men and women, because I know in some countries, you do not handshake.

A: Absolutely. And that's a good question. In fact, in Dubai, you would not shake hands with a woman. That would be inappropriate.

I: So how do you greet someone in a business setting if you as a western man are meeting a business woman?

A: Well, you would just make eye contact and would verbally just greet each other.

I: So you'd just say good morning.

A: You'd just say good morning, how are you, and then they would reply and then you would go on with the meeting.

I: Would you shake the hands of the males in the meeting?

A: Absolutely. That's perfectly acceptable.

I: So the hellos with the woman and then move on and shake hands with the man.

A: That's right.

I: Okay. Often business meetings are about negotiating terms or deals or finding out what the different parties want and reaching some kind of agreement. And I know in some countries you have to express disagreement a bit carefully. Is that the case in Dubai or can you be quite direct and say, "No, actually, we don't like this. We want to do X, Y and Z."

A: I think something that I've learned working internationally in business is that it depends very much on the individual. In Dubai, like in many countries now, there are a number of internationally educated professionals who will run a meeting regardless if the nationality of the person facing them will run it in the style that they want. And therefore, most meetings are international, so you can negotiate. You can present arguments in the way you would with anybody from any part of the world. So I think on one hand, it's fairly international and standardized. On the other hand, when you have more traditional local within your meeting, then you do have to be a little more careful. There's a big pride issue. You have to be very respectful in how you present your case. And as you said, certainly when it comes to negotiating, or sensitive points of the deal, you have to be very polite in the way that you present your argument.

I: Do you have to do research into finding out what kind of background the company has or the individual has before you deal with them?

A: Well, actually, it's a bit more than that. In fact, you have to, before you can really think about doing any kind of business, you have to take the time to build relationships. And relationships are extremely important in that part of the world, particularly with the more local business people. So that will mean perhaps going to their house or eating with them, maybe meeting members of their family. They may meet members of your family. So it becomes a very personal approach.

I: So you're building up a kind of level of trust.

A: Absolutely.

I: That's also reflected in the question you were talking about earlier, pace, that the key thing isn't necessarily to clinch that deal. You have to have the social bit as well. That's just as important.

A: Yeah. I think that winning trust, as you said, is the biggest challenge, is the hardest part of doing business. But once you have established that trust and taken the time and effort to build that trust, then relationships can be very strong and business can be very positive.

I: Do you think that many foreign business people make mistakes in this area, that they don't actually invest enough time and energy in this part of business?

A: I do. I do think that. And I think that many international business people see the region — the Middle East region — as a honey pot, as an opportunity to make money, to take money from the...

I: Fast.

A: To take money fast from the deep pockets. And of course there is a lot of wealth in that part of the world. So I do think that people see it as a short-term opportunity, but with that view, with that approach. They generally are unsuccessful.

I: That's very interesting indeed. Thank you.

A: You're welcome.