

Friendship or Business?

Decoding Brazilian culture

by Cris Wildermuth

“Anne” is frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations in Brazil. “It just takes *so long* and it’s so inefficient” she moans.

“Ed” can’t understand the Brazilian negotiation style. “They’ll say yes and be very friendly,” he observes, “but when you try to close the deal, they *never* seem to be ready.”

“Louisa,” who has recently arrived in Rio de Janeiro, finds her new colleagues extremely friendly but quickly becomes frustrated when she perceives that they don’t really mean what they say. “They keep inviting me to their homes,” she protests, “but if I try to schedule a date, they look confused!”

These three anecdotes illustrate cultural misunderstandings that could impact business dealings. Anne interpreted a lengthy negotiation as a sign of inefficiency. Ed failed to perceive that his negotiations weren’t going as smoothly as he thought. Louisa literally interpreted informal invitations similar to the U.S. American “I’ll call you one of these days.” Both Ed and Louisa failed to perceive subtle non-verbal clues that belied their interpretations of the messages received.

If you do business with Brazilians, you have probably worked hard to understand the local tariffs and trade regulations. You might recommend good information sources to your employees and make sure that they understand the latest political and economic developments. However, have you taken the time to analyze Brazilian culture and contrast it with your own?

Context

A name of great importance in the study of intercultural communications is that of Edward T. Hall.

Hall, a U.S. American from Missouri, wrote some of the most cited books in the intercultural communications field; including *Beyond Culture* and *Understanding Cultural Differences*. One key dimension analyzed by Hall is Cultural Context.

Context can be described as the information that we consider relevant during a conversation. To a certain extent, we all include non-verbal signals in the decoding of verbal messages. The cultural variation has to do with *the number of* non-verbal components we focus on. In high context cultures (such as Brazil, Spain, most Latin American countries, and India), the entire context of the relationship is considered as part of the communication:

length of acquaintance, hierarchical levels, environment, non-verbal signals, etc. In low context cultures (such as Scandinavian countries and Germany), one focuses mostly on the *verbal* components of the message.

Negotiations in high-context cultures tend to be indirect. If you fail to pay close attention to body language, length of negotiations, and other signals, you could feel that your negotiations are going great ... when in fact they might be headed in the wrong direction. You could also easily offend a Brazilian counterpart by “getting to the point” - American straightforwardness is frequently seen by Brazilians as a symptom of rudeness and even arrogance.

Cultural Context plays a part in the cases described earlier. Neither Ed nor Louisa were able to analyze the complex web of contextual information. Whenever you communicate with someone from a high context culture, you may want to be on the look-out for indirect signs of discomfort, uneasiness, or hesitation regardless of the words actually being used. You also need to remember that *you yourself* are communicating with far more than the words you use. You are communicating with the clothes you wear, your body language, the etiquette you follow, and the tone of your voice. In fact, getting acquainted with Brazilian social rules may be as important as the study of more tangible legislation and regulations.

Of course all that indirectness may lead to lengthier negotiations ... after all, you can't possibly understand all the intricacies of a non-verbal code if you haven't taken the time to know the key players. Initial chit-chatting could thus be compared to pre-negotiation research.

The need for relationship building in business endeavors is present in most if not all Latin American countries. In order to understand this practice a second cultural dimension is useful: Collectivism.

Collectivism

In 1980 Dutch interculturalist Geert Hofstede published a landmark book on cultural dimensions entitled *Culture's Consequences*. Data included in his book was generated from 40 different countries and questionnaires distributed to approximately 50,000 respondents. A vital cultural continuum analyzed by Hofstede was that of Individualism vs. Collectivism.

Individualism and Collectivism contrast the relative importance of individual and group needs in a given society. When individualism prevails, the individual's needs are paramount. Conversely, in collectivistic societies primarily the group's needs matter. Cultures are positioned somewhere along this continuum.

U.S. Americans typically express a high level of individualism. Great value is placed on individual rights, ambitions, and achievements. In fact U.S. American individualism is so strong that it is hard for many U.S. Americans to absorb and accept the very concept of culture (my behaviors are not about *my culture*, they are about *myself, my choices* ...)

Brazilian culture, on the other hand, is fairly collectivistic, with value placed on the needs and achievements of the *group*. It is also a very family-oriented culture, with key decisions being made based on their impact on the family. The word “family,” incidentally, has a different meaning - it typically involves what in the U.S. would be considered “extended family.”

Why does this matter? Since people negotiating with you might be keenly aware of the impact of their decisions on their teams and organizations, you want to make sure that you address that concern. Competition, in fact, may work poorly as a motivator in Brazil, and some people might prefer not to be singled out in public. If you want to win a contract, it may be more helpful to emphasize the advantages of the deal for the negotiator's business than for the negotiator him/herself.

An Important Caveat

Many of you $\frac{3}{4}$ Brazilians and U.S. Americans alike $\frac{3}{4}$ may be reading this thinking... "but that doesn't apply to me" or "that doesn't apply to Brazilians or U.S. Americans I know." Odds are, you're correct.

While generalizations make culture-specific studies feasible, they have obvious limitations. For instance:

- **Regional Differences:** Both the U.S. and Brazil are continental countries, with regional variations and very diverse populations. Any comparison between the "average Brazilian" and the "average U.S. American" could ignore these differences.
- **Individual Differences:** Culture *impacts* our behavior - it doesn't *determine* it. Individual variations are inevitable and stem from our upbringing, personality, experiences, environment, etc.
- **Globalization Impact :** Brazilians you do business with may have had considerable contact with U.S. Americans. Likewise, immigrants adopt many of the customs of their new country while keeping some of their old patterns - they become, in essence, cultural hybrids. If you're dealing with Brazilians who live in the U.S., most of the cultural traits considered "typically Brazilian" may have been attenuated or even eliminated.

These caveats would make it unwise for you to assume that if a person is from Brazil he/she *will* behave in a certain way. We're talking about *tendencies*, not *certainties*. Brazilians, after all, have the same ability anyone has to be unique and richly distinctive from their families or cultural norms.

Conclusion

It is impossible to address all the richness of cultural variations in a brief article. My objective was merely to bring forward the need to study intercultural relations when conducting international business research. When analyzing culture, you may want to go beyond simple lists of "do's and don'ts" and take the time to tackle broader dimensions. If you're looking for a bibliography or additional information, just send me an email - I'll be glad to point you in the direction of articles, web pages, and other sources of information.

Happy business dealings!