

Cross-cultural Intelligence in the Malaysian Working Environment

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Emile is a corporate trainer and language coach. He specializes in business communication, business writing, grammar, presentation skills, customer service and general English.

Originally from Scotland, before making Malaysia his home for the past 20 years, Emile has also worked and lived in the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Romania and Singapore.

Emile has over 25 years of corporate working experience in a diverse range of industries including colleges, banks, multinationals and small firms. Throughout his working career, he has held portfolios of head of department, product development manager and educational media specialist.

COURSE PLAN

- Part 1: Overview of Malaysia**
- Part 2: Malaysia's Cultural Indicators**
- Part 3: Communicating with Malaysians**

What makes Malaysia so special?



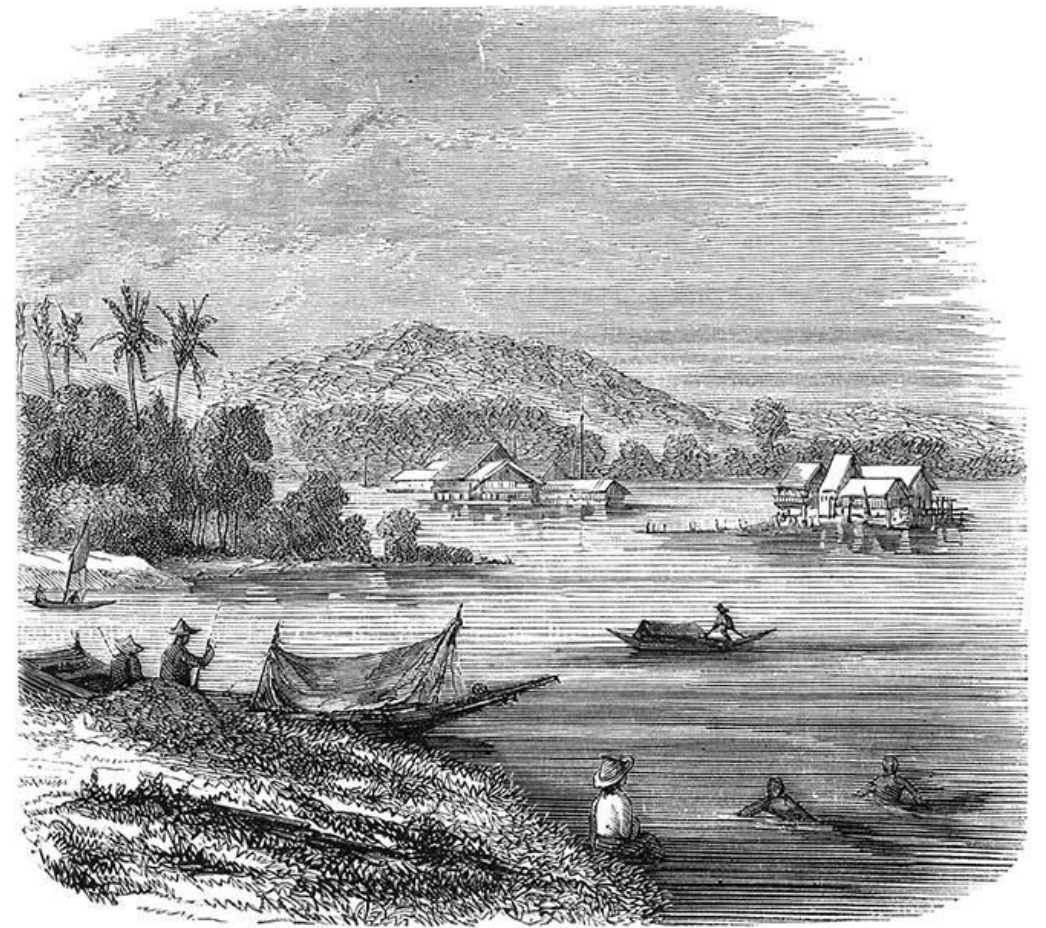
Malaysian ethnic groups

- Malay
- Chinese
- Indian
- “Orang Asli”



Malaysian historical background

- **1100s** Islamic era begins
- **1400s** Sultanate of Malacca
- **1511** Colonial era begins with the Portuguese
- **1641** Dutch colonial era
- **1824** British colonial era
- **1957** Independence (Merdeka)
- **1965** Singaporean independence



Malaysian business environment +

- Regional player
- Strong financial sector
- Oil & gas exporter (Petronas)
- Palm oil, tin and rubber are all major exports
- Offshore banking (Labuan)
- Digital economy (Cyberjaya, fintech)
- Strong population growth



Malaysian business environment -

- Low wages
- Growth not as strong as before
- Not as stable politically as before
- Disparities between rural/urban areas and ethnic groups



Malaysian business environment, govt role

The government is seen to be business-friendly and plays a major role through:

- GLCs
- Development plans
- Infrastructure projects
- Training and development



Examining Organisational Culture

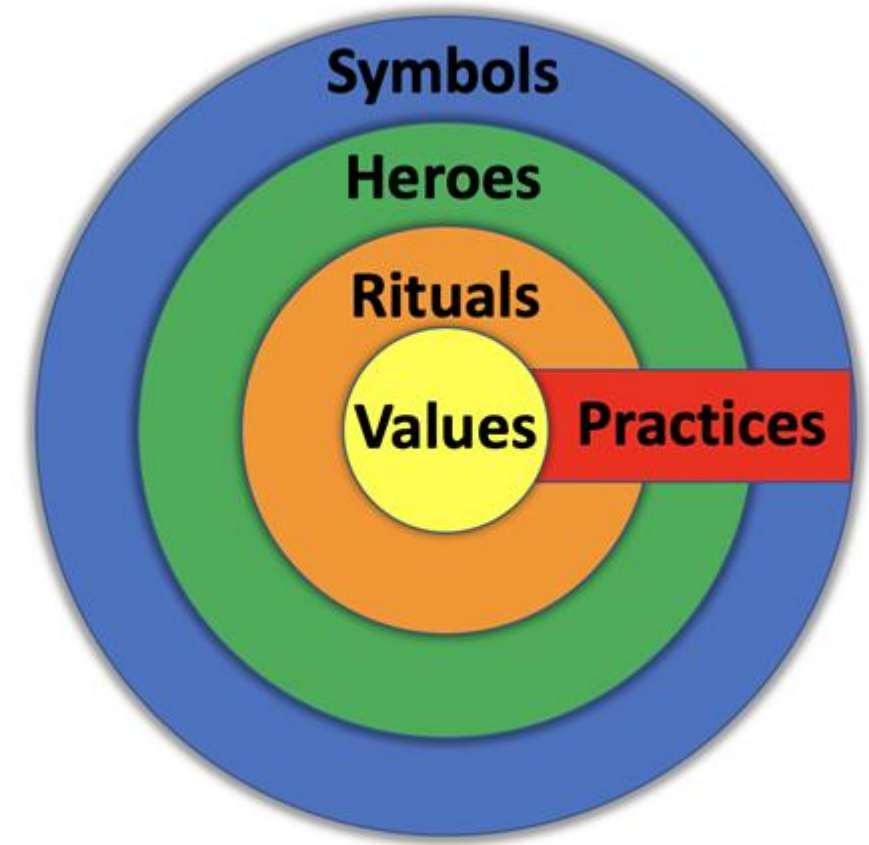


**How would you define
culture?**

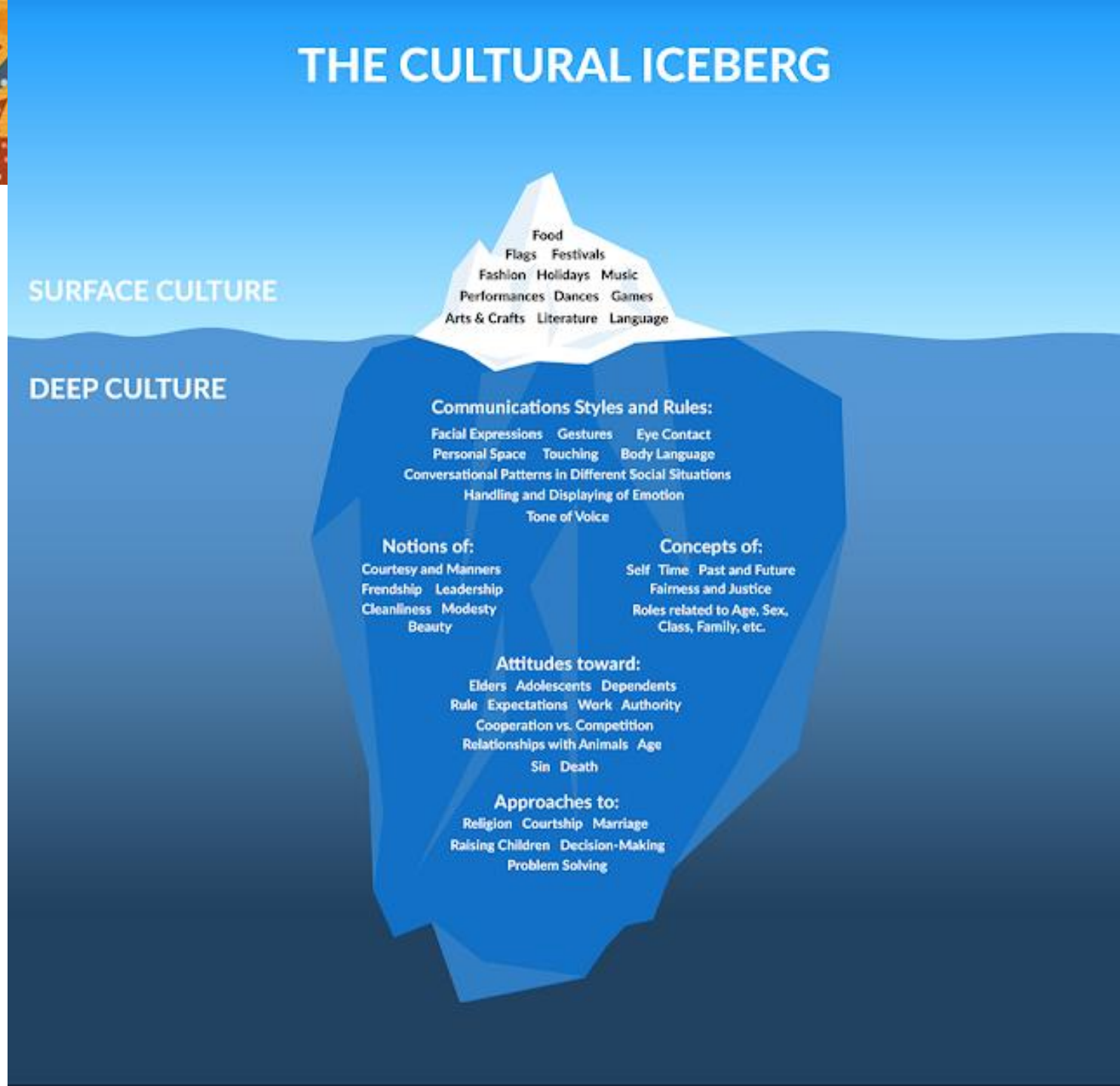


Cultures have **symbols**,
rituals, **heroes** and **values**.

Let's examine how corporate
cultures also have these
things.



Culture has symbols and rituals... but at a deeper level, our culture provides a set of values.





RUKUN NEGARA **(National Principles)**

KEPERCAYAAN KEPADA TUHAN
(Belief in God)

***KESETIAAN KEPADA RAJA
DAN NEGARA***
(Loyalty to the King
and Country)

KELUHURAN PERLEMBAGAAN
(Supremacy of the Constitution)

***KEDAULATAN
UNDANG-UNDANG***
(Rule of Law)

KESOPANAN DAN KESUSILAAN
(Courtesy and Morality)

What does the graphic illustrate?

Let's have a big hand for Jimmy Stevens,
our best performing salesperson in 2022!



Symbol

Ritual

Hero

Value

What does the graphic illustrate?



Symbol

Ritual

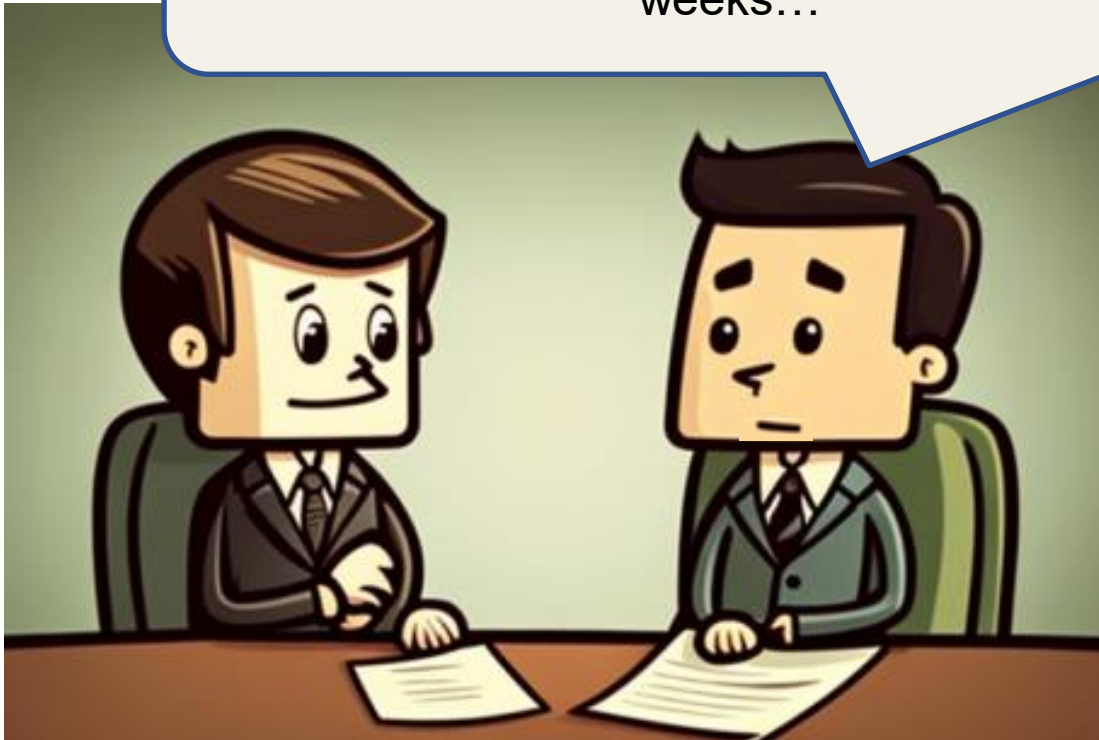
Hero

Value

The gold star that she is wearing indicates customer service excellence.

What does the graphic illustrate?

All new employees go through an orientation process called 'onboarding'. During these two weeks...



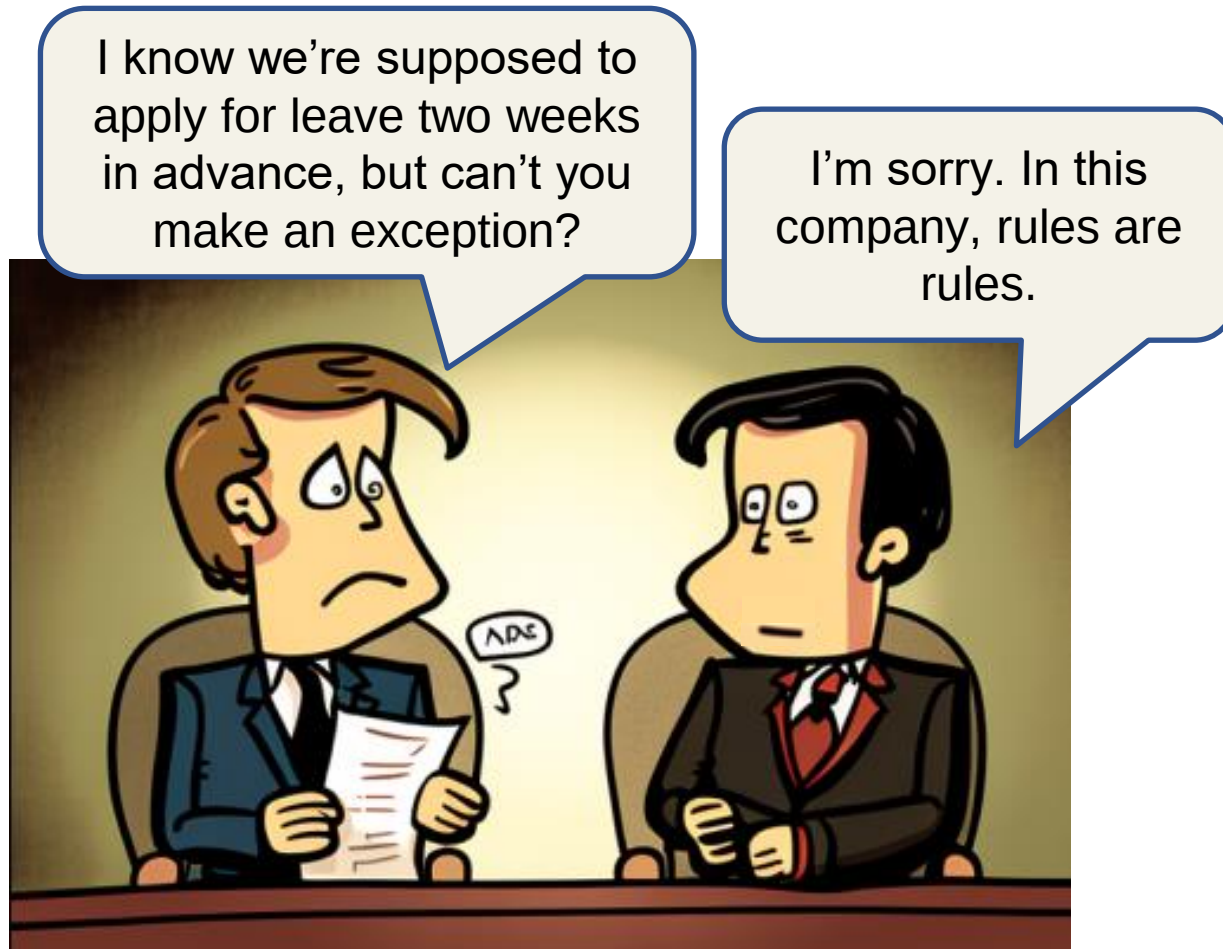
Symbol

Ritual

Hero

Value

What does the graphic illustrate?



Symbol

Ritual

Hero

Value

Understanding the dimensions of culture



Power and Status



The President of ABC Industries only speaks to employees by appointment.



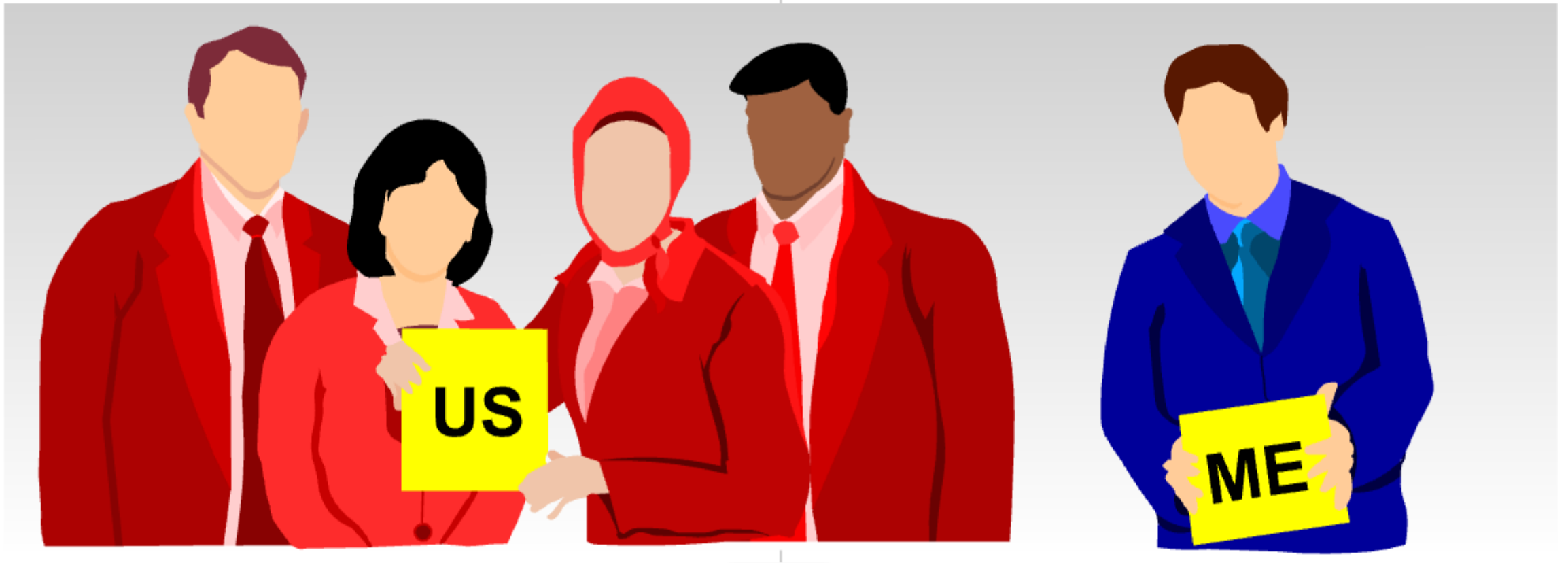
The President of XYZ Industries has lunch with the employees whenever he can.

Are these statements made by people from cultures with a large or small power distance?

1. Boss: "I'd love to hear everyone's thoughts before I make a decision."
2. Boss: "My ideal employee carries out my orders effectively and is always loyal."
3. Employee: "My ideal boss is a tough leader who takes no nonsense."
4. Employee: "My ideal boss runs the company efficiently in a democratic manner."
5. "Our company did well this year! All the employees can expect a great bonus!"
6. "You can't park there! That spot is only for managers."

Small Power Distance	Large Power Distance
Student-centered education	Teacher-centered education
Subordinates expect to be consulted	Subordinates expect to be told what to do
Corruption rare; scandals end political careers	Corruption frequent; scandals are covered up
Income distribution in society rather even	Income distribution in society very uneven

Group Dynamics and Individuality



Are these statements made by people from individualist or collectivist cultures?

1. "My parents always encouraged me to be independent."
2. "When we hire someone, we like to look at their background."
3. "I'm not really sure whether my country has a national day."
4. "In my country, people tend to stay with one job for their entire career."
5. "I am extremely proud of what my country has achieved."
6. "I like to have some time to myself, away from other people."
7. "In my country, people usually live with their parents until they get married."
8. "When I have to work closely with other people, I often get into arguments. But that's the best way to resolve things, isn't it?"

Individualism	Collectivism
"I" – consciousness	We" –consciousness
Right of privacy	Stress on belonging
Speaking one's mind is healthy	Harmony should always be maintained
Personal opinion expected: one person one vote	Opinions and votes predetermined by in-group
Task prevails over relationship	Relationship prevails over task

Tough or Tender? Masculine and Feminine Aspects of Cultures





The Red Culture is 'tender'. Core values in this culture are caring for others and modesty. Work and family roles are not thought of as male and female roles. Quality of life is thought to be more important than achieving success.



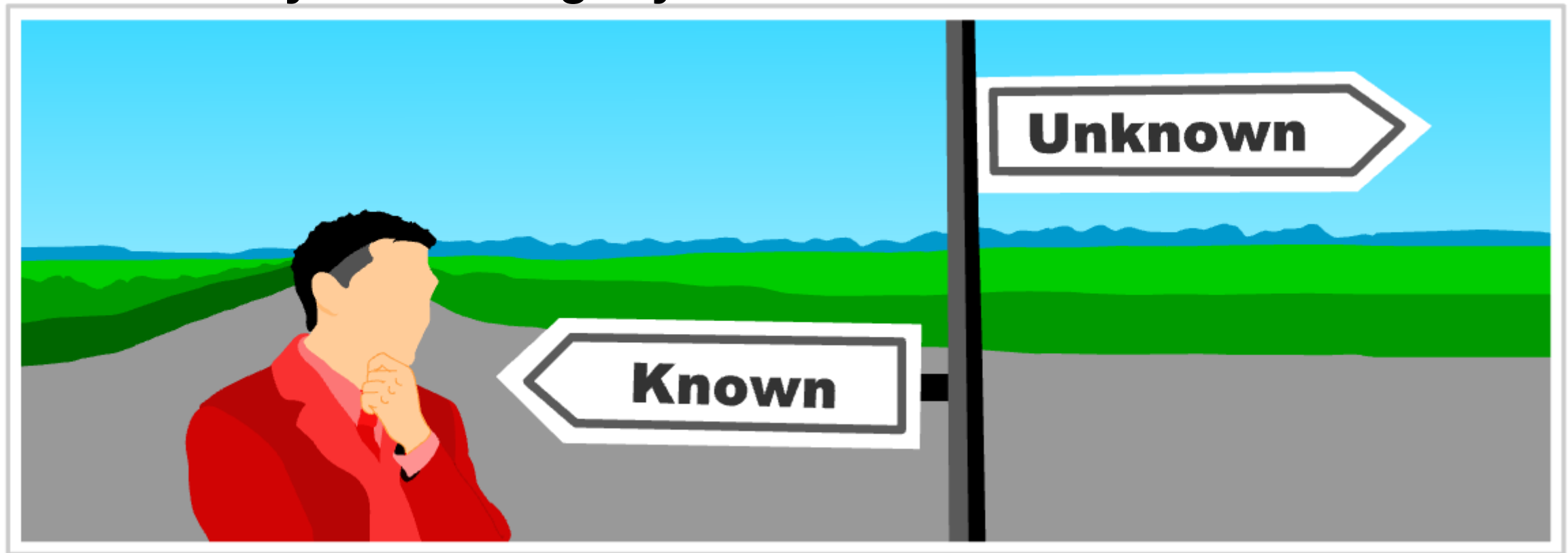
The Blue Culture is 'tough'. Core values in this culture are success and ambition. Work and family roles may be distinctly 'male' or 'female'. Employees are expected to be assertive, competitive and are judged on performance.

Feminine Culture	Masculine Culture
Men and women should be modest and caring	Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life
Balance between family and work	Work prevails over family
Sympathy for the weak	Admiration for the strong
Both fathers and mothers deal with facts and feelings	Fathers deal with facts, mothers with feelings
Many women in elected political positions	Few women in elected political positions

Are these statements made by people from tough or tender cultures?

1. "One more screw-up from you and you're out!"
2. "It's okay to make mistakes. We're all human."
3. "I hope the management can help us to resolve this issue. I know they care about us."
4. "If you want to get ahead in this life, you need to be strong."
5. "My manager was concerned that I wasn't pulling my weight."
6. "My manager was worried that my workload was too heavy."

Uncertainty and Ambiguity



Uncertainty and Ambiguity

In a culture where people **avoid uncertainty**, there tend to be **many rules**. People like a straight answer, rather than many different interpretations.

In other cultures, **uncertainty** is seen as a positive element and people talk about being **flexible** and **adaptable** as positive characteristics.



Weak Uncertainty Avoidance	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance
The uncertainty inherent in life is accepted and each day is taken as it comes	The uncertainty inherent in life is felt as a continuous threat that must be fought
Ease, lower stress, self-control, low anxiety	Higher stress, emotionality, anxiety, neuroticism
Higher scores on subjective health and well-being	Lower scores on subjective health and well-being
Tolerance of deviant persons and ideas: what is different is curious	Intolerance of deviant persons and ideas: what is different is dangerous
Comfortable with ambiguity and chaos	Need for clarity and structure
Dislike of rules - written or unwritten	Emotional need for rules – even if not obeyed

Are these statements made by people from cultures that embrace or fear uncertainty?

1. "I usually run red lights when nobody is around."
2. "When I have nothing to do at work, I feel really anxious."
3. "When I have nothing to do at work, I try to look busy in case the boss is watching."
4. "Don't worry, you're not late. The meeting only started ten minutes ago."
5. "If you want stationery, you need to fill in form 35b."
6. "Job security is more important than a high salary."

Long-term or Short- term orientation



Are these statements made by people from cultures with long or short term orientation?

1. "I'm scared to invest in cryptocurrencies."
2. "The new manager lost six matches in a row, so he was sacked."
3. "Have you noticed that, in this company, the salespeople are paid well, while the R&D researchers are paid badly?"
4. "When I was just 13, my parents set up a bank account, so I could save up my pocket money."

Malaysia's 'Hofstede' Scores:

[https://www.hofstede-
insights.com/country-comparison-
tool?countries=malaysia](https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=malaysia)



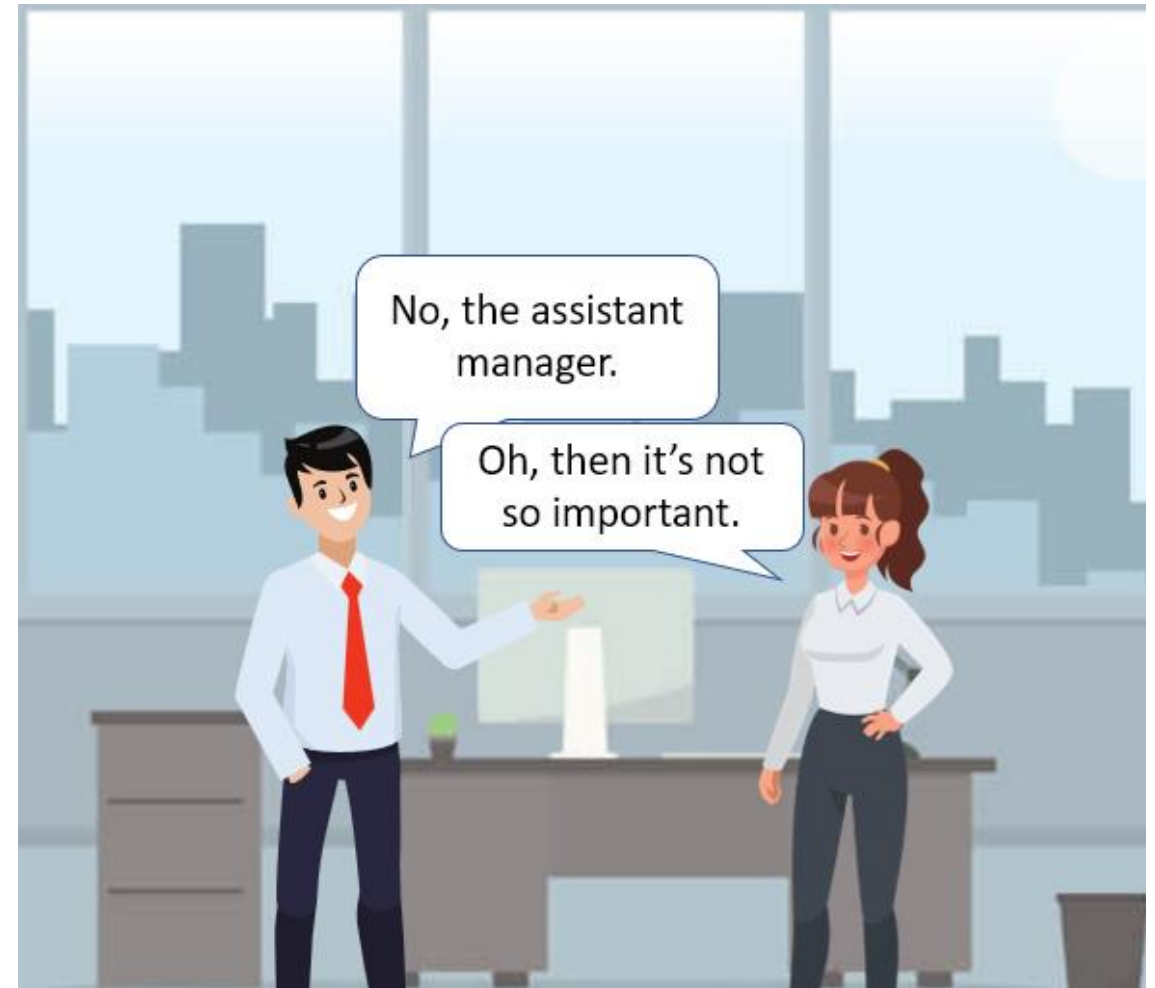
Sample AI Prompt:

Write an analysis of the differences in cultural dimensions between Australia and Malaysia

High and Low Context Cultures

How important is the message vs
How important is the context?





	High Context	Low Context
Interpersonal Relations	It is important WHO delivers information, when and why. Personal relationships are vital for business. Body language and what is unspoken is more important. Time is 'polychronic' – things happen when they happen.	A message is understood as is. Importance is placed on written contracts and written rules. The individual and individual rights are important. Time is 'monochronic' – things happen at one standard time.

Do the following scenarios describe a high context culture or a low context culture?

- 1 I think we should hire candidate A, because he comes from a good family.
- 2 Most people in our country sign a pre-nuptial agreement before marriage.
- 3 We have our weekly meeting sometime Tuesday afternoon after lunch, maybe 2 or 3 pm, depending on how busy everyone is.
- 4 Remember, we don't begin work until all the paperwork is complete.



Discussion

- Is Malaysia a high or low context culture?
- Is your own culture high or low context?
- What issues would a low-context person have in a high context culture?
- What issues would a high-context person have in a low context culture?

How can you improve communication between Malaysian and Expatriate employees?

- When in Rome... try to understand Roman culture
- Adjust your communication style
- Expect frustrations
- Avoid saying or implying that your culture is superior (superiority complex)
- Avoid favouring expatriates

Meetings

- Do meetings start on time in your organization?
- Do you defer to your boss?
- Are decisions made by consensus?
- How formal are your meetings?
- Who 'chairs' the meeting?



Cultural Influences on Meetings

- Punctuality
- Direct/indirect statements
- Understanding hierarchy
- Decision by consensus?
- Formality
- Who 'chairs' the meeting?



How can you ensure meetings are more effective in Malaysia?

- Ensure everyone contributes
- Avoid direct criticism
- Have clear actionable goals
- Allow people to work in groups

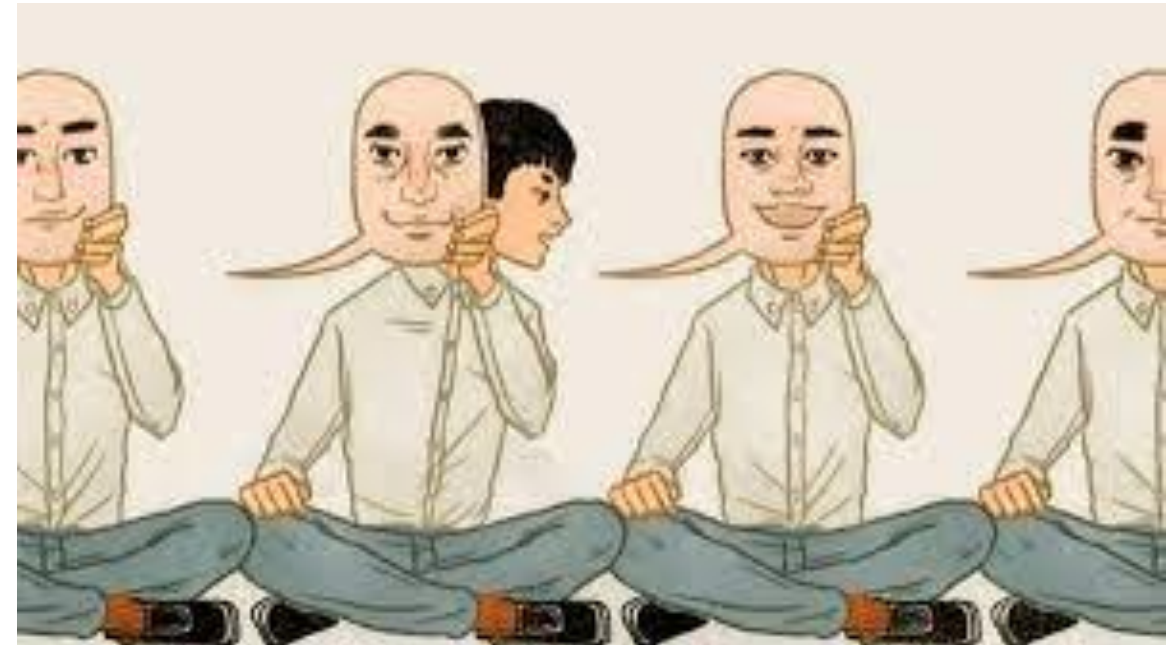


Negotiations

- When you negotiate, do you take a win-win approach? Do you expect a negotiation to be tough?
- Do you expect that the final decision will be made by one person?
- Do you believe that building a personal relationship is important before the negotiations can move forward?
- Do you ask for things in a direct manner or an indirect manner?
- Do you feel pressured for time?
- Do you place importance on non-verbal signals?

How can you avoid offending a Malaysian coworker or causing them to “lose face”?

- Switch to slightly more indirect communication
- Add a concession or positive spin to it when disagreeing
- Give critiques in private



Communication via Email and Phone

- Do you prefer to communicate in-person, on the phone or by email/WhatsApp? Why?
- Are your emails formal? When do you write an informal email?
- Is it better for an email to be short and direct or longer and more polite?
- Do you ask for things in a direct manner or an indirect manner?
- When you write an email, are you more concerned about being polite, avoiding mistakes or getting the message across?

Three types of emails

Postponement of Managers' Meeting scheduled for 11 May

This email refers.

Please be informed that the abovementioned meeting shall be postponed for a period of one week and shall be held on the 18th of May, 2022.

Should you be unable to attend said meeting, please inform the undersigned at your earliest convenience.

Mondays meeting

Mondays meeting is 2b delayed 4 one week. sorry, everyone. Pls let me know whether u can make it or not.

Monday's meeting to be postponed

Unfortunately, we will have to postpone this week's managers' meeting until Wednesday, May 18.

I apologise if this disrupts anyone's schedule. Please email me if you are unable to attend.

Faux Pas

- Public displays of affection
- Wearing shoes inside someone's house
- Dressing immodestly in the wrong place
- Speaking loudly in public
- Farting!
- Failing to respect elders
- The “three R’s” are considered sensitive topics (race, religion, royalty)



Non-Faux Pas

- Speak gently
- Show respect
- Avoid confrontation
- Don't cut people off when they talk
- Show curiosity but avoid probing questions or criticism
- Be patient



- Show respect for hierarchy and titles (Datuk, Dato, Tan Sri, Tun).
- While travel may be a considerable cost to you, the personal interaction achieved during face-to-face meetings are important and expected (at least initially and for matters of importance).
- Prioritise a long term, mutually beneficial relationship rather than seeking to merely derive maximum value on a transactional basis.

- Avoid outright disagreement on matters of importance; make difficult messages more palatable by using indirect communication.
- Avoid open conflict and showing strong emotions, be diplomatic.
- Show humility and respect.
- Appreciate the experience and wisdom of the local partner rather than coming in with a fixed mindset/approach or forcing your mindset/approach upon them.
- Prioritise mutual benefit (win-win) over competition (win/lose).
- Pressure tactics are very unlikely to work with business partners.

If you offend someone...

Malaysia has a culture of forgiveness, seen in the Hari Raya greeting, "*Maaf Zatin dan bahir.*"

Maaf = "sorry"

Maaf zatin dan bahir: "forgive me inwardly and outwardly"



Religious sensitivities

- It is illegal to proselytize to Muslims
- It is illegal to insult Islam (or other religions), including making jokes
- Muslim employees require a prayer room and to be able to pray at certain times during the day
- Ensure that a restaurant is Halal before inviting a Muslim client
- Don't make assumptions about religion (e.g., Siti doesn't wear a headscarf, so she's probably not that religious)
- Try not to eat or drink around Muslims during Ramadan

Islam in Malaysia

- According to the constitution, all Malays are Muslim
- There is a separate (Shariah) court system and some things are illegal for Muslims, but not non-Muslims, such as 'khalwat'
- There is a long-term trend that Muslims are becoming more conservative
- Currently, there is a strong anti-Israel sentiment, and it would be wise to keep any pro-Israeli opinions to yourself



Islam in the workplace

- Respect prayer times (they are flexible)
- Allow for a longer Friday lunchbreak for male Muslims
- During the fasting month, don't eat or drink around Muslim staff
- Some meetings may begin with a prayer





POST COURSE FEEDBACK

Individually, tell us what you do you take home from this course

**Before the course, I felt that (course name)
was ...**

**In this course, the most important thing that I
learnt is ...**

**After the course, I feel...(Next course of action/
hope)**

**People say YES
to people they
like!**

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**THANK
YOU**

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