

# The Heart of The Iceberg

New Perspectives for Cross-Cultural Office Management

By Michael Neuner

**Does the world map really tell the truth? Is Europe really in the center and Japan to the East? The Australian “down under” map moves that continent into the center, switches North and South, and turns the whole world upside down. “Not God, but the Europeans determine the world’s perspective.” With this, Eduardo Retta introduces the two-day Cross-Cultural Office Management training. Cross-cultural communication is the topic for two days for twelve personal assistants to top level executives at PriceWaterhouse-Coopers Deutschland.**

The program itself is “cross-cultural” in a striking way: Eduardo Retta, the American with a “Mexican soul”, and Christine Wirths, a German trainer and Managing Partner of the consulting firm “CultureWaves” team up to combine American and European work ethics in an easy to understand and entertaining manner. The program, organized by Aus - und Fortbildung (AuF) in Frankfurt, is tailored to employees whose work place is an “international interface”. Consequently, the seminar addresses cultural differences in written and verbal communication, the significance of cultural influences on translations, correspondence with international business partners, and the hosting of foreign delegations.

The fact that the seminar is conducted in English (“International English”, says Retta, “not British or American”) poses no problem to the participants who are from the service lines ABAS, TLS, and CP and who have daily contact with international business partners from Portugal to

Russia, from Sweden to Italy. The introduction is followed by a case scenario: In a non-verbal role play staged by the trainers, the participants are confronted with a ceremony unknown to them. There is no insight into the culture portrayed, which quickly leads to a discussion about the meaning of culture. *The purpose of the seminar is suddenly very tangible:* Those who want to understand cultural differences, in-depth must first recognize their own cultural limitations.

## “It’s not about shaking hands”

Speaking for the quality of the training, “Cross-Cultural Office Management”, organized by AuF three to four times per year, is always booked to the last seat. The seminar is in-depth, avoiding completely the issues of “surface culture”. Retta and Wirths like to reference the “iceberg concept”: Our primary perception when confronted with a foreign culture is of external features such as clothing and eating habits. Wirths, who developed the

training method and tailored it to the demands of the target group, emphasizes: “We do not offer tricks and tips on whether and how to shake hands, or whether a kiss on the cheek is appropriate. This is about ‘deep culture’, which means: How do other cultures perceive such difficult-to-determine dimensions such as power, time, hierarchy, or risk?”

In a variety of compelling ways, by interviews, individual and group exercises, case scenarios, and role playing, the seminar offers a bird’s-eye view of our own culture and others. What is “typical” for Americans, Germans, and British? Which differences in work ethics are important and can be observed time and time again? Where does prejudice begin?

What are the implications for my relationship with a person from Japan, knowing that his appearance and decision-making are more group-dependent than that of an individualistic American? Who would have known that there are ethnic groups with a high

or low need for security, with high or low risk avoidance? The importance of this is especially well known to employees in administrative positions who interface with international business partners and are generally their first point of contact in the company. Ultimately, the first business card presented by an international company is the quality and professionalism of its cross cultural office management.

*Translated by Angelika Gary*

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culturewaves.com  
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