Multicultural Class Teaches UD Students How to Do Business With Other Countries
MULTICULTURAL CLASS TEACHES UD STUDENTS HOW TO DO BUSINESS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES

DAYTON, Ohio — Culture colors the way we see the world, including the world of business.

Don’t believe it? Well, try persuading an Italian to buy your software over the phone or introducing a Japanese CEO to your senior software designer in hope of selling him a shipment of your goods.

Most likely, neither deal will go down.

Why? Invariably, the gregarious Italians favor “face-to-face negotiating” and the hierarchial Japanese consider it taboo for a company executive to discuss business with someone of lesser status, explains Dean Stilwell, a University of Dayton associate professor of management and marketing.

To avoid such errors in international etiquette, Stilwell has created an undergraduate course to help students increase their chances of success in today’s global marketplace. The multicultural management class, in its second year, is an adaptation of an MBA course Stilwell has taught for the past several years.

“Culture has a major impact on how people behave, no matter the particular culture. If we can start with a basic understanding of those differences,” Stilwell explains, “then we can focus on similarities to get us to work together. We can then use those differences to create synergy, to create something better.”

Students for the first half of the semester study “cross-cultural differences in decision making, negotiation, conflict management, communication and general business relations,” Stilwell says.

In the main text used in the class, the author sketches the diversity of a country via an allegorical characteristic of that particular culture. Some chapter titles: “Irish Conversations,” “The Japanese Garden,” “The Israeli Kibbutzim and Moshavim,” “The Italian Opera” and “American Football.”

As important as knowing when to shake hands, bow or embrace is understanding a culture’s collective psychology when approaching business, Stillwell says.

For instance, “Italians tend to be more emotional when doing business than, say, the Asians, who see emotion as bad for business. Italians don’t like to use faxes or phones because — over —
they believe true communication only comes face to face.”

The Russians, like the Japanese, are “very status conscious,” Stilwell says. “Everyone knows where they fit in their society. They also thrive on networking, which has been a way of surviving for them, using a ‘You scratch my back, I’ll scratch your back’ approach.”

The Japanese, more than any other culture, use business cards to establish a hierarchy between and among negotiating parties, Stilwell says. “If they see by your card that you have greater status than them, they will not talk to you but will present someone in their company who is of your status. It’s a very hierarchal society.”

Consistency and building trust are important to the Israelis, Stilwell says, as is maintaining a noncompetitive posture when doing business. They seek “win-win” agreements and are democratic in their decisions.

“Everybody has a voice when the Israelis are conducting business,” Stillwell says. “And, after a decision has been made, they understand their role in keeping the group’s fortunes together. They never seek individual adulation.”

Then there are the Americans, Stilwell says, whose strong sense of individualism can interfere with international communication.

“Three-quarters of the world believe that the group is more important than the individual,” he says. “Other cultures equate this American individualism with self-interest, which can be an obstacle to doing business.”

In the course’s second half, students work as a group to develop a business manual on a specific culture (this semester, Germany). As their final exam, they will be given a performance appraisal, much like in the workplace, and are required to present their findings in a forum similar to a job fair or conference at the end of the term.

The forum has been tailored to the needs of fellow UD students who will participate in eventual exchange programs. Students involved in next summer’s program in Augsburg, Germany, will benefit from this year’s forum.

“To make this class more interesting for our students, we came up with an idea to create training manuals for UD students who are part of the exchange program,” Stilwell explains. “This way the school benefits from this project as well.”

Successful business leaders understand that there are “multiple ways of doing business, of attacking a problem,” Stilwell says. “If you don’t get students to start thinking about it, they’re going to use their own cultural biases to decide what is right and what is wrong. You then become very parochial and ethnocentric in the way you think.”

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