

Have you practiced your peach behavior today?

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There is no doubt that cultural differences are in focus for Danish companies with activities on the US market. And these can prove particularly demanding if awareness about the issue is not raised and addressed. However, when conducting business across cultures, barriers are often overlooked or simply neglected as an important factor for ensuring a constructive negotiation. Our event “US Business Culture - Handling Differences within people management” February 25 addressed these exact challenges. Here are some of the key conclusions:

Get rid of negative connotations

Presenting various strategies and tools for overcoming cultural difference was Henry Bak Zinglersen, director of cross-cultural consulting at Aperian Global. Initially, he addressed the importance of raising awareness around cultural differences, ensuring the recognition of a significant cause of misunderstandings between the Danish and the US business culture. He demonstrated how most Danes viewed themselves as being on the “right” side of the cultural spectrum feeling little or no need for cultural adjustment, a problem which is equally evident for Americans.

Stand by your cultural roots

Culture cannot be taught, it was concluded by Lars Christian Hansen from Novozymes, presenting his personal experiences at the seminar. Bringing Danish values with you in business situations can prove extremely successful in certain situations. E.g. he experienced great success from taking a couple of weeks as a blue collar worker during his time as the president for Novozymes’ US. According to Lars, this describes typical Danish management style and completely unheard of by his US management team.

Practise peach behavior

However, Danish behavior and values can easily be misinterpreted by US counterparts, and in some situations, adapting the behavior of Americans may prove beneficial. Johnny Nielsen from Coloplast experienced the positive results of adapting what he called “cheer-leader manners” raising both arms and exclaiming “we can really do this” as he presented an ambitious new strategy to his US staff in Coloplast’s US subsidiary.

Henry Zinglersen presented a creative interpretation of the differences between the Danish and the American culture in the idea that Americans are equivalent to peaches, meaning that they hold an approachable “soft” exterior, but simultaneously hold a solid core indicating an open-minded and welcoming attitude on the outside, but a tough hard-hitting inner core. When in business contexts, Americans typically tend to easily open up and share more of their personal life – the peach pulp – than Danes. Danes were by Zinglersen, on the contrary, compared to coconuts: A thick shell and reserved at first, but containing a softer core once we let someone behind the hard exterior.

Awareness gets you far

Notably, the main issue is not that the difference in business behavior exists, but rather the fact that both parties often are unaware of it, and that neither party tries to adapt to the foreign cultural environment. Both parties view each other as being in the “wrong” end of the cultural dimensions.

Mainly addressing Danish firms in the US, the problem was addressed and described as “practicing peach behavior”, introducing various tools for mastering American business etiquette – the cheerleader manners described above being a great example.

Essentially the focal point was not to change or ignore ones cultural behavioral patterns, but to introduce a series of tools to help Danish and American business partners to culturally adapt to one another’s business environment by means of practicing little cultural adjustments on a day to day basis.