

# Meetings Take on Their Cultural Backdrop



By Eden Collinsworth

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**M**y professional life has unfolded in ten-year increments all over the world. I have been the president and publisher of a book publishing company; the founder of a magazine; an officer of a multi-national, multi-media corporation; and the chief-operating-officer and chief-of-staff of an international think tank while working in five international time zones.

Despite the advantage of a global perspective, I have no idea how humanity will manage its complex future. I am, however, certain on one point: the businessmen and women who are thriving in what will continue to be a globalized information economy are adaptable and possess the ability to navigate increasingly diverse cultural landscapes. Regardless of one's nationality or background, knowing how to communicate in a meeting is a definite advantage.

Meetings can either be an effective way of getting things done, or a time-waster, depending on how they are organized in advance and managed once they are underway. It seems to me — and, I would guess, a great many other Western business people — that our Chinese counter-parts hold too many meetings, and that those meetings almost always run at least twice as long as they should.

The structure of meetings is also different between East and West. In China, the person in charge of a meeting will often explain issues that have been covered before the meeting. In the West, the practice is to open the meeting with a relatively short recap of what has already been agreed, and to focus the meeting on issues that need further discussions which culminate in decisions.

Truth be told, in the past ten years of doing business in China, I can count the

number of effective meetings on one hand. Regardless of the cultural backdrop, meeting leaders can be more efficient by drawing up an agenda; setting time limits for each item, and sticking to both the agenda and the time limits. Better also to keep in mind that whether you are meeting with one person, several people or many people, the day of the week and time in scheduling the meeting should be done with some forethought. Alas, even with this rudimentary point, there is a gap in perception between East and West. In the West, mid-mornings and afternoons seem to be the most productive times. In scheduling business meetings in the US, the UK and in Europe, I take care to avoid Friday afternoons when people are sometimes thinking of the weekend and not focused. That is not the tendency in China where — more often than not — people work during the weekend.

Westerners allow plenty of advance notice in scheduling a meeting (at least 5 working days for a meeting among inter-office colleagues; at least 2 weeks and, ideally, 3-4 weeks for important, formally-structured meetings with outside participants). They distribute an agenda at least two days ahead of a meeting with colleagues; at least 1 week (which includes a weekend) ahead of a meeting with outside participants. They confirm the meeting's time and place by phone with all attendees the morning of the day before. Once the meeting is underway, everyone in the room turns off anything that makes noise, including cell phones. Not so in China.

Meetings in China do not necessarily adhere to Western practices; so my advice is to be prepared to be flexible and to find it in yourself to remain as non-judgmental as possible. Intra-cultural communication is a two-way street. ☺

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