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Text: Joy Bolli

Building Cultural Bridges across the Atlantic

You know the feeling: You're sitting in a conference call, and you don't seem to be getting anywhere. When Swiss and US colleagues work together for the first time, misunderstandings are inevitable. Expert and regular speaker on the subject, Enid Kopper, tells us how cooperation can be improved.

More than 600 employees attended the "Paradeplatz meets Manhattan" event which was organized by Credit Suisse Diversity and Inclusion for the second time this year. As the bank's equal opportunities unit, Diversity and Inclusion is responsible for issues such as discrimination, deals with problems such as harassment and mobbing, and helps foster cooperation between different cultures. It was against this backdrop that the specialist unit extended an invitation to Enid Kopper, an expert on cross-cultural communication. Born in the US, Kopper has lived and worked in Switzerland for over 30 years. As a trainer and owner of Trans-Cultural Relations, she is familiar with the different approaches to project management and teamwork that can make daily work between American and Swiss colleagues challenging. In her talk she describes the generalizations, underscores the importance of the individual's own culture, and gives her audience specific tips to improve cooperation.

Rethinking Stereotypes

"All human beings think in terms of stereotypes," Kopper explains, "and that's OK, because stereotypes are important. They say a lot about the basic characteristics of a culture." The stereotypical Swiss, for instance, is seen as consensus-oriented and modest. The Swiss tend to be reserved, avoid risks, and work in a structured, precise manner. The stereotypical American, by contrast, is viewed as assertive. Americans are confident, talk a lot and get straight down to business.

But beware: Think in terms of stereotypes alone, and you soon forget that your counterpart is a unique individual with his or her own set of life experiences. Globalization may mean that behavior patterns among people from different countries and cultures are becoming more similar. We're also seeing a convergence between American and Swiss standards and values. Consensus-driven Americans and go-getting Swiss are not so unusual these days. Kopper illustrates this trend using the results of international studies. She backs up the research with anecdotes from her personal experience: "When I arrived in Switzerland 30 years ago, I found warmth and enthusiasm. At that time, Europeans saw America as the land of opportunity and progress. Today, things are a little different." The picture of the average American has indeed changed over time. The same is happening for the average Swiss, German, and Indian.

Stumbling Blocks to Cooperation

In her talk, Kopper tackles the traditional stumbling blocks to cooperation. One of them lies in the style of decision-making: While the Swiss seek a consensus and move jointly toward a decision, American colleagues engage in an exchange of opinions. For them, however, the decision lies clearly with the line manager.

Another difference is the concept of quality: The Swiss design things that are built to last. They weigh up the issues, and incorporate all contingencies into their planning. This requires a lengthy development period. Implementation then takes place very quickly, and things still work perfectly even decades later. Americans on the other hand, don't spend much time planning or worrying about quality. They reach a decision quickly, implement it and continuously adapt and improve the product. Is that a bad thing? Not necessarily, because in today's international markets the requirements change every couple of months. "Americans are not bothered about tomorrow, they're interested in earning money today. Anyhow, clients will want a different product tomorrow," Kopper explains. What one person sees as lack of commitment to quality can mean flexibility for someone else. In the case of joint projects, it is therefore useful to allow Swiss members of the team a clearly defined period for collecting and analyzing information and data. This, she believes, enables quality requirements to be met and at the same time sets boundaries for the planning phase.

The Key to Success

A project that works only 5 percent right and 95 percent wrong is no problem for Americans. They believe in continuous improvement and do not expect everything to work perfectly straight off. "Americans always see the positive things first, which they appreciate and praise. Only then do they look at the remaining 95 percent, and view this as a challenge for improvement". Quite unlike the Swiss, who tend to downplay a 95 percent perfection rate. This simply means they planned things well. Their immediate question is why 5 percent are not working well. "Here the Swiss could do themselves a big favor by not focusing immediately on problems," Kopper explains. "Acknowledge and praise what works well. This will motivate the Swiss as well as the Americans - and you have nothing to lose in the process." The expert even lets us in on her magic formula for critical feedback: "The perfect ratio between praise and criticism is 5:1, and begin every criticism with praise - every single one!"

So, is there a key to joint success? Kopper asserts. "It's about respecting the values and attitudes that drive a culture, and incorporating them into the way you work together. Then all parties will be fully motivated."



Enid Kopper is a trainer and proprietor of Zurich-based firm Trans-Cultural Relations, Consulting and Training. Her specialist areas include intercultural management, communication and team development, multicultural assessments and conflict management in Switzerland and the US. Ms. Kopper is a guest lecturer for the Swiss Society for Work and Organizational Psychology. She has written a number of publications, and authored a book entitled "Globalization: Putting the Vision into Practice" (original title: Globalisierung: Von der Vision zur Praxis).