

Communicating for International Expansion

by Seth Kahan

*The process of world construction is taking place wherever people are in communication...**

Expanding business internationally is a challenging, multi-dimensional adventure. In addition to the business activity itself, there is the underlying need to communicate with people who see the world fundamentally differently, to build a robust sense of common understanding, and negotiate a mutually beneficial way into the future that adheres to the integrity of your organization. Here are some principles to make this easier:

1. Different people live in different worlds.

There is no requirement by the world that we interpret it in a particular way. Thus, when two people observe the same event, they will naturally come to different conclusions. This is normal. What is obvious in one person's frame of reference is not necessarily obvious in another's.

2. Trust building is unique for every relationship.

We make sense of our experience in relationship, socially, with other people. Our understanding of what is trustworthy springs from our interactions. When we enter into a new relationship with a foreign business partner, both parties are building this from scratch. Have patience and look for opportunities to establish bonds.

3. Focus on utility; learn your partners' needs.

Shared understanding springs from the needs we have for negotiating our world. In other words, we create meaning to help us move through life successfully. So, when we take on new business partners, the needs we each have drive our shared understanding. For some it is the personal. For others it is professional. Take the time to learn your partners'.

4. Have patience; you are constructing the future.

Agreements open and close possibilities for the future. For example, if we have a sense that we have little impact in a particular area, we are likely to do little to influence it. However, if we hold a perspective that we can exert powerful influence, we are very likely to get engaged. Take time with ideas important to long-term success.

5. Strategic reflection is a critical competency.

Re-examining our assumptions is vital to building new cross-cultural relationships. Because our view of the world is something we construct, it is critical we continuously call into question what we take for granted. This happens through listening to others who see the world differently, and wrestling with the consequences of multiple perspectives. The challenge is rewarded by more robust solutions.

These five principles provide a framework for improving your capacity to create joint values and navigate a way forward together with people from other cultures. They make it possible for you to engage others with very different perspectives and together build common understanding. This is fundamental to getting change right, and creating constructive engagement across different cultures.

* Gergen, Kenneth L. (2009), *An Invitation to Social Construction, Second Edition*, Sage Publications. This framework is based on Gergen's work in Social Construction.