

## **Culturewise – Focus on Australia**

### **Australian Business Culture**

Australian business-culture is likely to be remarkably familiar to those with experience of working in other English-speaking countries (particularly the USA and UK). International work practices and attitudes are familiar to most Australians, and the presence of so many overseas-born Australians in the work place means that, in general terms, Australians are among the most culturally sophisticated people in the world.

However, beneath the global veneer there are a range of shared beliefs and values that the majority of people who live in Australia would recognise as being characteristically Australian. In particular, three interrelated cultural features are often identified as setting Australians apart from other similarly developed English-speaking countries.

### **The Battler**

Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey used the phrase the ‘tyranny of distance’ to describe Australia’s geographical isolation from the rest of the world, and the impact of the nation’s vast size on Australian society and culture. Still today, in spite of Australia’s huge size, the country’s population is concentrated in a few large urban and suburban centres situated hundreds of miles apart.

A particularly potent cultural myth that came to reflect the values of early Australian communities and the challenges posed by the ‘tyranny of distance’ was that of the ‘Battler’; a resolute and determined working class figure who, against all the odds, achieves success through determination, persistence and sheer hard work. Similar in some senses to the American ‘Pioneer’ or Argentinean ‘Gaucho’ figure, the Battler encapsulates the qualities of self-reliance, individual responsibility, and perseverance that were vital foundations for settler survival in early Australia.

On the surface it might appear that in today’s prosperous Australia, the greatest battle most middle-class Australians face is getting their BMW through the rush-hour traffic. Nevertheless, the figure of an ordinary working-man fighting the system and earning a living against many odds continues to resonate at all levels of society. In building effective and productive relationships, business visitors to Australia can usefully exhibit a suitable level of battler spirit through persistence, perseverance and an ongoing determination to achieve long term business objectives.

### **Mateship**

Mateship can be defined as a code of social behaviour between men (and less frequently women) stressing shared small group obligations, friendship and mutual protection. In its idealised form Mateship represents men, standing together with other men, against whatever situation or third-

party presents a mutual threat, regardless of the personal cost. Unconditional acceptance, mutual respect, sharing whatever is available no matter how meagre, trust, selflessness and absolute interdependence are all seen as characteristic expressions of Mateship.

In its most positive form, 'Mateship' serves to underpin the highly-effective approach to team-working that is visible in the Australian work environment and elsewhere. In its less positive form, mateship still occasionally provides implicit justification for excluding women or minorities from white male-dominated work environments, or in attempts to protect team colleagues against perceived challenge or criticism from managers or outsiders, even when such criticism is wholly justified.

Business visitors to Australia need to be aware of the importance of group solidarity, particularly in male-dominated work environments, and sensitive to the importance of being 'good mates' with business contacts. As a general rule of thumb making an effort to develop trusting personal relationships at all levels in counterpart organisations is likely to enhance a visitor's chances of doing business effectively. Also of importance is adopting a somewhat more consensual management style that might be seen in, for example, the USA.

## **Give a bloke a 'Fair Go'**

Together with Mateship and the Battler, Australian culture attaches considerable value to egalitarianism and, in particular, overt support for those perceived to be suffering from unfair or disadvantageous treatment. Giving a bloke a 'Fair Go' means, at least in theory, providing disadvantaged individuals with sufficient opportunities to demonstrate the Battler spirit and achieve whatever they may be capable of, whether at work or elsewhere.

As might be expected in such a diverse society, some Australians demonstrate a certain cynicism about the concept of Fair Go, particularly in light of the continuing disadvantages suffered by the indigenous Aborigine population. Other critics suggest that a dislike of apparent privilege can occasionally drift into 'cutting down the tall poppy'; otherwise understood as a desire to bring high-flyers, high earners, or those deemed to be over-achieving in any sphere down to earth.

The concept of Fair Go can be seen in a variety of different ways in Australian work environments. Australians are generally wary of appearing boastful, arrogant or somehow 'better' than others. This modesty can appear, at least to US or continental European eyes, to extend to their own accomplishments, successes and expertise. Indeed, Australians may appear to those from other cultures to occasionally withhold positive information about themselves that might be freely given in other cultures. Praise is also given less often in Australian workplaces than elsewhere. This is partly to avoid creating tall poppies, and partly because it may be seen as insincere or unwarranted, particularly if it raises the suspicion that individuals are being set up to be embarrassed or teased.

As might be expected, Australian management hierarchies tend to be flat and egalitarian, and Australians can demonstrate a certain distrust of those at senior levels, or those perceived to be emphasising position, title, educational achievement or status over and above what they have

actually achieved in the work environment. As a result, a good general rule of thumb for business visitors to Australia is to remain friendly, relaxed, modest, and unpretentious, and to let one's professional achievements speak for themselves. Business visitors would also benefit from ensuring that commercial proposals and negotiation strategies are perceived to be both fair and reasonable.

## **Business Etiquette and Protocol in Australia**

### **Relationship-building:**

- Australians are very matter of fact when it comes to business and do not need long standing personal relationships before they do business with people.
- Australians are relatively informal and are likely to move to a first-name basis in business immediately (or at least quickly). As in most cross-cultural situations, a good rule of thumb is to let counterparts set the level of informality and then mirror it.
- Communication:
  - Australian communication styles tend to be direct and low-context, with very little of the face-consciousness and focus on maintaining harmony seen elsewhere in Asia-Pacific. However, in conversation, refrain from drawing attention to your education, professional experience, business success, and related achievements, even if these are genuinely impressive.
  - There is often an element of humour, sometimes self-deprecating, in their speech.
  - Professional titles are not prominent in Australian business culture. Avoid 'advertising' your hierarchical status or title when meeting local counterparts.
  - The work environment in Australian business culture tends to be somewhat more consensus oriented than in the US. Highly directive leadership styles are less common than consensus oriented styles. Senior management will generally consult subordinates and take account of their input when making decisions.

### **Meetings:**

- Business cards are exchanged at the initial introduction without formal ritual.
- If you are not given a business card, it is not an insult; the person simply may not have one.
- Presentations that are perceived as overly-enthusiastic, overly-earnest or filled with exaggerated claims are unlikely to be well-received. Keep presentations modest and straightforward.

## Negotiating:

- Australians get down to business quickly with a minimum amount of small talk.
- Business presentations should be straightforward and to-the-point, with an emphasis on both the positive and negative outcomes of any proposal.
- Decision-making is relatively fast, and often takes place at more junior organisational levels than may be the case elsewhere. Unlike elsewhere in Asia-Pacific, Australians rarely find it difficult to answer 'no' clearly and explicitly when asked direct questions.
- High pressure negotiating and sales techniques may threaten trust and damage visitors in the eyes of Australian counterparts. Being straightforward and realistic and following through on promises is likely to prove a more persuasive approach to getting things done.

## Socialising:

- Although traditional Australian food had its roots in working-class British food, modern Australian cuisine is characterised by the blending of many different ethnic traditions including Thai, Chinese and European (i.e. Italian, Greek, etc). This type of 'Fusion' food is highly recommended.
- Wine is the usual preferred drink at meals, although beer is often drunk beforehand.
- Table manners and settings are similar to those in the UK and North America.
- You may be invited to an Australian's home, even after a relatively brief acquaintance.
- Barbecues are a particularly popular form of informal home entertaining. Anticipate casual dress and lively socialising. Bring a bottle of wine or food for sharing and expect to serve yourself buffet style.
- Anticipate splitting a restaurant bill during informal entertaining unless a specific offer to pay is made either before the meal or at the conclusion of the meal.
- As in the UK, each individual member of social groups visiting a bar or pub is expected to pay for a round of drinks. Failing to pay for a round will create a bad impression.
- If invited out for a drink, avoid bringing up the subject of business unless your host does so.

## Dress:

- Business dress is fairly conservative in Melbourne and Sydney.
- Men should wear a dark coloured, conservative business suit.
- Women should wear a smart dress or a business suit.

- In Brisbane or other tropical areas, depending on the job function and company culture, men may wear shirts, ties and Bermuda shorts.
- Please note within the Engineering industry it is by no means common practice to wear business suits to meetings and it is advisable to check the dress etiquette prior to business travel and meetings.

### **Business hours and appointments:**

- Punctuality is important in business situations. It is better to arrive a few minutes early than to keep someone waiting.
- Business in Australia takes place year round, although it is sensible to avoid scheduling visits around Christmas and Easter, since many people take holiday during these periods.
- Unannounced visits are not part of Australian culture. Book appointments in advance.
- Normal business hours are 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday, although many employees may well work considerably longer hours.

### **Taboos:**

- There are no real 'taboo' subjects to be avoided in conversations with Australian counterparts, although visitors should heed the usual warnings to avoid talking politics or religion. In addition, uninformed comments about controversial issues such as migration restrictions and aboriginal rights are likely to invite robust responses.
- Business visitors should anticipate encountering women in all sectors of the Australian work environment. Overseas business women visiting Australia should not anticipate encountering any particular challenges.
- As in the UK, the term 'mate' is used to refer to same-sex friends and acquaintances. However unlike in the UK, 'mate' tends to be used at all social levels in Australia. Australian women may also refer to other women as 'mate'.