

A project team comprised of colleagues from four European countries is making their first business trip to China. They have an initial meeting arranged with a new Chinese client. The Chinese client is a State Owned Enterprise (SOE).

Preparing for the meeting

Gunter from the firm's Frankfurt office has been tasked with developing initial contacts with his Chinese colleagues in Beijing, and with preparing an agenda and discussion points for the meeting.

Gunter has not yet had the chance to visit his Chinese colleagues. So far his contact with them has exclusively been by phone and email.

Two weeks before the meeting Gunter arranges a conference call with the Beijing office in order to ask for input on how to approach the meeting. During the call Gunter feels that while some of his senior Chinese colleagues join in to offer opinions and ideas, other very knowledgeable junior colleagues do not seem to wish to share their thoughts.

Gunter's Chinese colleagues ask very few questions during the call, despite Gunter pressing them to do so. From Gunter's perspective they seem to say 'yes' quickly to the matters being discussed, which Gunter understands to mean they agree with his overall approach to the meeting.

One Chinese colleague, Li Qing, asks Gunter if a Partner will be able to come from Europe for the meeting. Gunter assures her that this is not necessary as he and his European colleagues have a well-developed level of expertise in this area.

Gunter sets aside an hour for this call, but after just 25 minutes his Chinese colleagues seem to have no further input to give. Gunter ends the conversation with a promise to email a brief agenda to Beijing a few days before the meeting.

Gunter's discussion notes, which he plans to hand-out on the day of the meeting, are all in English. However to make things easy for the client, the discussion notes contain red highlighted text to indicate key issues of concern.

Gunter also prepares some small gift boxes for the representatives of the Chinese client. These are wrapped in white gift-wrapping paper, and comprise sets of 4 small items, each embossed with the firm's logo. The sets contained a pen, pencil, letter-knife and clock.

- 1 Consider Gunter's approach to preparing the meeting**
 - a) What did he do well?
 - b) What could he have done differently?
- 2 Which contrasting Chinese and Western cultural values do you think impacted on this situation?**

Entering the meeting

Susie is from the firm's London office and is the oldest member of the European team, although not the most experienced in this particular area of law.

Susie and her European colleagues arrive in good time for their meeting at the Chinese client. Joining them is Li Qing from the firm's Beijing office. The group is taken to wait in the lobby area outside a large conference room.

When the Chinese client team arrives some 15 minutes late, Susie sees that there are many more members than she anticipated. Susie is not quite clear who is who, but she takes the initiative and introduces herself as 'Susie Smith' enthusiastically to each person in turn, starting with the person closest to her.

Li Qing beckons to Susie to come over. She introduces Susie to Zhang Wei, who Susie knows to be one of the client's senior Directors. 'Good to meet you Mr Wei' Susie says, ensuring she keeps good eye contact with him. Susie shakes the Director's hand vigorously and smiles broadly.

Susie is aware that they are behind schedule, so seeks to keep small talk with Zhang Wei to a minimum. She is polite but clearly indicates she wants to get down to business. After all, time is money.

After what seems like a long wait Susie is shown in to the meeting room first, ahead of Zhang Wei who follows behind her. Susie is shown to a seat at the centre of a one side of a large conference table, directly opposite Zhang Wei.

Susie quickly tells Zhang Wei that she would like to swap seats with Diego from the firm's Spanish offices. This is because Diego will take the lead in delivering a point-by-point discussion of the key challenges the client will face in in Europe. Although fairly junior and quite new to the firm, Diego has acknowledged expertise in the relevant area. 'So' Susie explains briskly to Zhang Wei, 'he really is the ideal choice to lead this project'.

Susie takes Diego's place at the far end of the conference table, but not before pushing her business card across the table to each of the people opposite her.

- 1 Consider Susie and her colleagues' approach to entering the meeting.**
 - a) What did they do correctly?
 - b) What could they have done differently?
- 2 Which contrasting Chinese and Western cultural values do you think impacted on this situation?**

During the meeting

Diego's from the firm's Madrid offices has a presentation style that is enthusiastic, energetic and passionate, with plenty of hand movements and gestures to emphasise key points.

Some of the Chinese client team are informally interpreting Diego's words into Chinese for their colleagues. This worries Diego as he is concerned that the full value of his arguments may not be getting across. 'Perhaps' he thinks to himself, 'we should have arranged for an interpreter in advance'.

However, throughout his presentation Diego sees the clients nodding their heads and making some positive sounding noises. 'Good', he thinks to himself, 'my ideas are being well received'. He feels pleased when Gunter, Susie and Anne (from the Paris office) interject from time to time with supportive comments that expand and develop his arguments.

Diego makes sure his presentation is packed with facts and figures from respected sources in Europe and North America. He also makes clear that, in his opinion, these sources provide a broader and more up-to-date evaluation of the situation than the Chinese government's own data. The Chinese clients seem rather uncomfortable with this statement and Li Qing rapidly moves the discussion to another area.

On one occasion Diego directs a question to one of the younger members of the client team who seems to have some key financial data in front of him. The Chinese team member appears slightly embarrassed. There is some discussion in Chinese among the client team before Zhang Wei responds that 'the data is not clear at the moment'. Diego presses Zhang Wei on when the data might become available. Zhang Wei responds, 'We have to think about it as we are not sure'. He then says 'There is a small issue with the approach you would like us to take'. Diego takes this to mean that Zhang Wei broadly agrees with his suggestions, but that there may be one or two minor reservations that require further work. Diego makes a mental note to tie these details up once an agreement has been gained in principle.

At the end of the presentation, Diego asks the group if they have any questions or comments. He is met with complete silence. After what Diego considers to be an appropriate wait he turns to Zhang Wei and says 'I hope you found that useful'. Zhan Wei replies that yes 'the team did find it useful'. Diego is a little surprised when the meeting conclude with no discussion of potential next steps. But, he thought to himself, the evening banquet would provide a perfect opportunity to tie this up.

- 1 Consider Diego and his colleagues' approach to the meeting.**
 - a) What did they do correctly?**
 - b) What could they have done differently?**
- 2 Which contrasting Chinese and Western cultural values do you think impacted on this situation?**

The evening after the meeting

Later than evening Anne from the firm's Paris office, joins Gunter, Susie and Diego to attend a restaurant banquet at the invitation of the client. Also there is Li Qing, from the firm's Beijing office.

On their way to the restaurant Anne and Li Qing began chatting. Li Qing asks Anne, "Are you married?" Slightly surprised at such a direct question, seemingly out of nowhere, Anne replies, "No I am not."

"Oh", says Li Qing, "Why aren't you married?" Anne stumbles for an answer to what she feels is now intrusive questioning. She replies, "Well... I am not sure that's something I want to share with you." Li Qing seems a little taken aback by Anne's response and decides to try another approach. "What made you and your family decide on a career in law?" Anne replied that she made the decision herself and that her parents had wanted her to study medicine instead. This answer seemed to surprise Li Qing, who said nothing more.

Zhan Wei starts off the banquet with a toast to the European team's presence in China emphasising how much he valued getting to know them.

Anne has been chosen by her colleagues to reciprocate the toast. This she does a few courses after Zhan Wei toasts. Anne tries to be warm and sincere, and her toast makes clear how keen she and her colleagues are to be able to work with the Chinese client in the future. She feels afterwards that her toast may have gone on a little too long.

During the banquet there seems to be an almost constant rotation of dishes. Anne does her best to sample at least a little of each one. However one dish looks so unappetising that Anne simply decides to invent a fictitious 'food allergy' as an excuse to the client to avoid trying it. On another occasion she nods as discretely as she can to the waiter to take the plate in front of her away and change it for a clean one.

Shortly after dessert, Zhan Wei stands up and is quickly followed by the remainder of the client team. He briefly thanks the guests for attending and proceeds to leave the room, followed by his colleagues. Anne wonders whether she did something to offend him.

- 1 Consider Anne's approach to the evening.**
 - a) What did she do correctly?**
 - b) What could she have done differently?**
- 2 Which contrasting Chinese and Western cultural values do you think impacted on this situation?**