



turning managers into leaders

Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – July 2009

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji turns managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and facilitated workshops, she gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403-605-4756

The importance of culture

As I write this issue of the Mega Minute, I am sitting at my desk in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I have been living and working for the last couple of weeks. This is my first time in South America, so not only am I learning specifically about Argentina and its people, but also about Latino culture in general. I have discovered an unusual (at least to me) custom in this part of the world – porteños, as the people from Buenos Aires refer to themselves, greet each other with an effusive kiss on the cheek (always to the left). This is done in both personal and business situations, and even men follow this pattern. A huge believer in the philosophy of “when in Rome ...”, I quickly caught on to this practice and started to do the same, much to the delight of my porteño business colleagues here in Buenos Aires. In fact, my Canadian and American colleagues (all male) who are here with me realized this and began to follow this convention as well ... that is, except for one person. This poor guy just cannot bring himself to kiss other men on the cheek. He mumbles, reddens, and gets flustered any time he is introduced to a new local businessman. As the unsuspecting Argentinian shakes his hand and reaches forward to kiss him on the cheek, my American friend sidesteps and ducks. The unfortunate result: both parties are clearly uncomfortable, and what should be a positive business relationship, starts off on the wrong foot.

Which brings me to this month's topic – the importance of recognizing and adapting to existing culture. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about the accepted norms in a country or a city, or the culture of an organization or a department, your success in any environment increases exponentially if you recognize and adapt to existing customs. You may laugh at (or perhaps even agree with) my American friend, but by not observing this norm of Argentinian business culture, my colleague has put himself at a relationship disadvantage. Without meaning to, he has marginalized himself, and so he runs the risk of not having his ideas and thoughts heard and acted upon. Could you perhaps be doing the same in your work environment? By not being

aware of the unwritten rules and customs in your company or department, could you unintentionally be putting yourself on the outside? Could you, inadvertently, be sabotaging your contributions to your organization's success? It's a possibility worth considering.