



Cross-Cultural Challenges for the South African Family Business Consultant: Gerhard Visser, FABASA Accredited Family Business Consultant (Associate of André Diederichs & Associates)

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FAMILY BUSINESS CHALLENGES

Like everyone else, family business consultants are products of their own culture, religion, and ethnicity. Therefore, they are just as likely as their clients to either emphasize or de-emphasize emotions in dealing with issues, including those that are unique to family enterprises. Family businesses usually have highly charged emotional environments. Therefore, trying to keep emotions out of the family business consulting process will yield no better results than trying to keep them out of family relationships.

It is difficult to strike the right balance between rationality and emotionality when consulting to business families, no matter whom or where they are. Achieving that balance in the South African environment is even more challenging.

Emotion is:

The complex psychophysiological experience of an individual's state of mind as it interacts with biochemical (internal) and environmental (external) influences.ⁱ

Culture is:

A shared set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviour organized around a central theme and found among speakers of one language, in one time period, and in one geographic region.ⁱⁱ

Different cultures place varying emphases on emotions and their expression. Research on the relationship between culture and emotions dates back to 1872 when Darwinⁱⁱⁱ argued that emotions and the expression of emotions are universal.

Cultures have different norms regarding the value of different emotions. For example, one culture can value anger and believe it to be a tool through which maturity and wisdom are gained, while another culture can spurn anger and believe it to be a socially disruptive force to be avoided at all costs (Briggs^{iv}; Lutz^v). In many Asian cultures, social harmony is prioritized over individual gain, whereas Westerners in much of Europe and the United States prioritize individual self-promotion. Research has shown that individuals

from the United States are more likely to express negative emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust both alone and in the presence of others, while Japanese individuals are more likely to do so only while alone^{vi}. Furthermore, individuals from cultures that tend to emphasize social cohesion are more likely to suppress their own emotional reaction in order to first evaluate what response is most appropriate given the situation^{vii}. Collectivistic cultures are believed to be less likely to express emotions, in fear of upsetting social harmony^{viii}.

In highly structured societies, rationality is likely to take precedence over emotions. In repressive regimes, emotions may be luxuries few people can afford. Because business families are embedded in their local culture, it is safe to assume they are in concert with prevailing attitudes and customs regarding emotions and their expression. Therefore, South African family business consultants should be prepared to adapt to their clients' frame of reference regarding emotions more than vice versa.

Being well travelled is usually a plus for family business consultants in the cross-cultural setting. Conversations between South African family business consultants and their clients regarding art, music, and travel can and do serve many purposes. They may be litmus tests^{ix} for determining the family consultants' maturity, life experience, and knowledge beyond what they learned in school. They may provide common ground to help establish rapport between consultants and clients. They may allow clients and consultants to talk meaningfully about matters of mutual interest, beyond the business at hand. Ultimately, the universal language of arts and travel may well be the best means to establish emotional connections between people of different cultures,

racess, and religions, including between family business consultants and their clients.

Consultants in the South African environment need to adapt to the customs and rituals of their clients, without undermining their efficacy in working with them. Maintaining proper balance between flexibility and adhering to structure is no easy task. Casual attire, approximate meeting times, leisurely lunches, and late dinners may rule with some cultures, while strict dress codes, punctuality, working lunches, and formal dining in the evening prevail with others. South African family business consultants must discern what is essential to serving their clients' needs and what is not. They need to determine when it is

prudent to adapt to local customs and at what point they lose credibility and control, along with their authenticity and self-regard, by doing so.

South African family business consultants must be able to intuit clients' different comfort levels with people of varying personalities and to calibrate their own conduct accordingly. It takes a combination of empirical data, self-knowledge, psychological insight, intellectual rigor, empathy, and discipline for South African family business consultants to help clients of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities to realize their goals and aspirations.

END

RESOURCES:

ⁱ <https://www.boundless.com/definition/emotion/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.boundless.com/definition/culture/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Darwin, C (1998). *The expression of emotions in man and animals*. London.

^{iv} Briggs, J. L. (1970). *Never in anger: Portrait of an Eskimo family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

^v Lutz, C. A.: 1988, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and their Challenge to Western Theory* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

^{vi} Matsumoto, David (November 3, 1990). "Cultural Similarities and Differences in Display Rules"

^{vii} Matsumoto, Yoo, Nakagawa. "Culture, emotion regulation, and adjustment." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 94 (6), 925

^{viii} Miyahara, Akira. "Toward Theorizing Japanese Communication Competence from a Non-Western Perspective". *American Communication Journal*.

^{ix} Litmus test: a test in which a single factor (such as an attitude, event, or fact) is decisive. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/litmus%20test>