

Monsoon Wedding *by Greg Nees*

There are many obstacles to developing good working relationships with individuals from other cultures. Are you someone who thinks emotions distract us from making good decisions and have no place in business? This attitude is common in parts of Europe and the United States but can be counter-productive in many parts of the world. If you think business is only about numbers and the bottom line, you can learn a lot by watching *Monsoon Wedding*. This entertaining Indian film by Mira Nair is an insightful portrayal of one of the most “invisible” challenges currently facing global businesses: emotionality. And because India is on its way to becoming one of the world’s major economies, this film drama, at times funny and at times moving, may give you insights into some of your future business partners.

Monsoon Wedding revolves around a fundamental issue currently facing us all: Change and the emotions it generates. *How much must I change to succeed in the global market? How much can I remain the same?* This issue re-surfaces periodically in this realistic and complex story of an extended modern Indian family returning home for the traditional arranged wedding of Aditi Verma. As old and new intersect the fun begins.

Science shows that people everywhere have the same basic emotions. That’s a question of physiology. But each culture has its own rules for managing and displaying these emotions. Even when covered up, emotions serve as the psychological platform upon which we erect our working relationships.

Study the scene in which Lalit Verma, an affluent businessman negotiates with Dubey, an ambitious young entrepreneur with a penchant for obscenities. Lalit is scolding Dubey for erecting a white tent for the wedding of Lalit’s daughter. Notice the emotional intensity of this exchange. Watch the wavy movements of Dubey’s head – is he agreeing or disagreeing with Lalit? Notice too, the rapid changes of expression across Dubey’s face. What are your reactions to these expressions? How do they make you feel? Can you guess what he is thinking and feeling? Could you imagine a productive working relationship with Dubey? What about with Lalit? How would you react to being scolded so intensely by your boss?

Emotionality is one of the great unspoken challenges of doing business successfully, especially since much of human emotionality is expressed nonverbally and unconsciously. Take, for example, the common case of Germans and Americans working together. Both Germans and Americans agree that it is desirable to appear “confident” in public. “Confidence” is one of those good parts of ourselves which we enjoy both experiencing and displaying to our peers. In the U.S. business people show their confidence through “optimism”, “enthusiasm” and “openness”. While these attributes are also expressed verbally, their more convincing effect comes from nonverbal behavior, that is, via tones of voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture and other subtle signals. And while signs of “positive” emotions such as happiness are tolerated or even welcomed in U.S. business situations, anger is not. Unless it’s a boss talking to a subordinate.

In Germany confidence in business is expressed more via “*Ernsthaftigkeit*”, “*Sachlichkeit*”, and “*Beharrlichkeit*”. These attributes also have both verbal and nonverbal components. And while a degree of irritation and displeasure are considered acceptable in German business situations, walking around smiling will get you labeled childish or worse. As a result of these different ways of expressing “confidence”, when Germans and Americans work together they often unconsciously misinterpret the other’s behaviors and intentions. Far too often, Germans see the Americans as unrealistic, naïve and boastful. And just as often, Americans view the Germans as stubborn, unfriendly and arrogant. Needless to say, such misinterpretations do not improve the bottom line. Just ask some of the folks at DaimlerChrysler.

Although it was almost 30 years ago, I can vividly remember the surprising interaction of the lead German electrical engineer and the African civil engineer who was General Manager of a large Nigerian construction company. The German team had come to Kano in northern Nigeria to install sophisticated radio equipment at the transmitting station the construction company was building. We were standing informally in a tight circle, drinking our morning coffee when the General Manager reached out and carefully straightened the German’s wrinkled shirt collar. The move only lasted about three seconds but the German engineer’s nonverbal response told it all: Surprise, discomfort and a desire to fight or flee. He was obviously not used to such emotional closeness in a business situation. The African was attempting to build a good working relationship by showing care and consideration for his counterpart, but what the German experienced was obviously very different. Our visceral reactions to nonverbal behaviors, especially touch, point to the deep well of emotionality within all of us.

To explore this issue of emotions and relationship, recall the last time someone physically touched you in the workplace. Was it that first handshake in the morning? A friendly pat on the shoulder to indicate a job well done? The unavoidable rubbing of shoulders in the elevator? Maybe a hug? Remember how this contact made you feel? From which associates do you welcome touch? From which associates does the very thought of touch trigger sensations of fear or disgust?

The smart business person dealing with partners from other countries will spend some time carefully observing the differences in nonverbal behavior and the conventions of emotionality in relationship building. The truly courageous business person will see these differences as an opportunity to grow and will self-monitor his or her emotional reactions and discuss these reactions with trusted associates. Monsoon Wedding is a great entry point into this topic – it is a feast for the eyes, a serenade for the ears and a delight for the heart. Watch it once to simply enjoy the story. Then watch it again using these study questions to begin exploring the emotional world of communication and relationships in the global market. Enjoy!

1. Study the golf scene carefully as Lalit asks to borrow money from his friend. What do their casual remarks about his “cash flow problems” say about Indians’ expectations of

friendship and loyalty? What do the joking remarks about his “cash flow problem” within the foursome say about openness and sharing?

2. What does a four day long wedding ceremony say about the importance of family in India? How does the loyalty we learn and experience in our family impact the loyalty we feel towards the organizations we belong to? Towards our leaders and subordinates? Towards our peers?

3. Observe Dubey carefully. What are your reactions to his facial expressions? What is your reaction to the general level of emotional intensity in the film? Where are you on the emotionality scale? How do you react to associates from work who are more emotional? Less emotional? How do these reactions help or hinder you in working effectively with them?

4. What does the inclusion of Dubey and his bride in the final scene say about the evolution of India’s culture and its caste system? What does the growing popularity of yoga in the west and the American “high five” on the golf course say about the influences that cultures have upon one another in our globalizing world?