



## Communication with Saudis

Heng Wang

School of International Economics and Trade, Shandong University of Finance

No. 40 Shungeng Road, Jinan 250014, China

E-mail: whhelen@hotmail.com

### Abstract

People have different cultural characteristics that affect the way they do business. Using compelling ways to categorize major cultural differences, this paper helps the reader understand how different concepts of time, the relevance of status and power in shaping organizational structure, communication methods, and ways to conduct meetings and social gatherings, all influence how interactions with a specific culture in Saudi Arabia can be made effective.

**Keywords:** Culture, Communication, Business

“He who steals the egg steals the camel”

“He who does not recognize the falcon grills it”

“Those who spend their wealth night and day, both privately and publicly, will receive their earnings from their Lord. No fear will lie upon them nor need ever feel saddened” (Arabic proverbs, Rothlauf, 1999, p403, p361)

### 1. Foreword

In my memory Saudi Arabia is a country, in which all men are wrapping with white scarf and having white blouses, all women are wrapping black scarf having black blouses and wearing always veils with only two big eyes staring on foreigners in vigilance, and is a country, which is very rich and has very high temperature. I have also heard of that the country hates communist a lot—I was a communist party member, now I have to handle with Saudis.

### 2. Introduction of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula, is the 13th biggest nation in the world, it occupies about 75% of the Arabian peninsula in South West Asia. Oil dominates the Saudi Arabian economy, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest producer and exporter of crude oil, with the money earns from oil Saudi Arabia imports transport equipment, consumer goods, machinery etc. The availability of desalinated water has allowed the development of agriculture, which employs 48% of the workforce. The most famous city Mecca is visited by more than 1.5 million pilgrims a year, making a vital addition to state revenue. Nowadays Saudi Arabia has been taking measures to encourage tourism within the country—includes both sides: Saudis getting out seeing their own Kingdom (in stead staying at home) and attracting foreigners. Main indicators:

Area: 2,149,640 sq. km

Population: 20.3 million

GDP: \$145 billion, ranking 28th

GDP per capita: \$7,286, ranking 49<sup>th</sup> (Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p4)

### 3. Culture

Saudis are multi-active and dialogue-oriented. (Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p4)

#### 3.1 Employer/employee relations

Saudis are people oriented. Though there is also modern laws to guide employer/employee relation (such as employer employee dispute solving etc.), the religion plays very important roles, according to Islam basic principle: every individual should be honest and be responsible to the group; every one should be treated equally (but not men and women); personal freedom and humanity should be guaranteed. Well beings of fellow men will be ensured: who must take care the sick family members do not need work in enterprises, who has pray responsibilities can leave work to Mosque nearby.

#### 3.2 Present vs. Future Orientation

Saudis are future oriented, they consider that they are tightly ally with each other as well as with their organizations, diffuse relationships with high context communication in which one is bonded to organization as a whole thought they

are future oriented, they don't keen to make long term plan, actually they lack of long-term objectives. A common problem with many organizations in the Kingdom is that they do not establish a long-term plan and make firm commitment for their organizations. Most of them do not have a philosophy for quality, or a vision or a mission. They also lack the availability of documented procedures that show how the organization is operating.

### 3.3 Negotiation/compromise

Saudis focus more on person relation rather than task, they are looking for sincerity in your dealings with them, normally they are hard bargainers and regard the bargaining process as a normal part of both business and social life, the spoken word, when solemn, has much more weight than written agreements. The solemn commitment of a senior Saudi when pronounced orally in front of witnesses can generally be relied upon. Saudi has great pride in their personal integrity.

### 3.4 Entertaining

There are many taboos in this field: no alcohol; no pork; no nightclubs; no movie theatres; dressing appropriately, not mention female relatives, don't become overly familiar with the few women who are allowed to be met, don't challenge the basic concepts of Islam, use only right hand when at dinner etc. One should especially pay attention!

### 3.5 Communication

Saudis are extremely extrovert, theatrical, declamatory. (Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p5) Loudness of voice indicates sincerity. Eloquence and even rhetoric are admired and expected. They talk about family influence and connections in a boastful manner. Tone of conversation is often moralistic and integrity has priority over rationality. They are not very good listeners, strong eye contact is preferable. Flashing eyes and striking facial expression are part and parcel of discourse. Touching is frequent and expected. Kissing between men is common (even with foreigners once friendship is established.)

### 3.6 On the job actions

Saudis are honest to their organizations, and they consider they are parts of the organizations. Enterprises in Saudi Arabia are managed like a family, Top-down decision making, highly bureaucratic, over centralized with power and authority at the top. Leadership: patriarchal management style, highly authoritarian tone, rigid instructions, too many management directives, very less information will be exchanged. (Rothlaud, 999, p391-395) Ways of motivating and rewarding: Intrinsic satisfaction in being loved and respected management by subjective. Criticism and conflict resolution: Turn other cheek, save others' faces, do not lose power game. Never criticize or berate anyone publicly. Mutual respect is required at all times.

## 4. Three situations

### 4.1 Situation 1: I am a chef of a Saudi

#### 4.1.1 Assumptions

Assumption 1: sure this subordinator should be a male and works in China, female Saudis seldom go abroad and work there (if the subordinator is a female, I will apply for change a position and let a female chef to supervise her.)

Assumption 2: there is only one Saudi, other subordinators are Chinese.

Because 1. I am a Chinese.

2. according to homework instruction: only one person from we chosen region.

3. I would like to eliminate one situation that all subordinators are all Saudis, next I would like to let my Chinese subordinators go along with this Saudi.

Assumption 3: the Saudi is for sure important for our firm (otherwise I will not waste limited sources to supervise him)

#### 4.1.2 Two advantages can be taken for granted

a. Saudi Arabia is a rigid Islam country, this gives Saudis a tremendous power of religious faith, and a national unity based on a uniform social cultural code of living together. There is a meaning of commitment and pursuit of goals all along. Prophet Mohammed has said: "God likes those who do something they do it at their best". The Islamic religion has been a way of life for the Moslem society since the birth of this religion, and will continue to bring strength among families, societies and nations. So I have sufficient reasons to believe that he will be honest, he will do best on his job. Religion has tremendous strength which other ways, such as every day doctrinally to tell him "work hard", to monitor him very tightly, or to motivate him with money, can not get the same effects, but Saudi always shows honesty to others, in the same time they expect to see same honesty from others, that requires me and other co-workers to do the same, maybe the problem is how to show our honesty.

b. Education is being emphasized in Saudi Arabia. Saudis are being very open to learning new technology and acquiring management skills. Aspiring young Saudis have been encouraged to go to college not just at no cost but even through a

monthly compensation paid by the government to all students enrolled. Furthermore, the government has done an remarkable job in allowing as many students as possible to get their education overseas for advanced studies or specializations. Industry-wide technical, supervisory, and managerial training programs, in-company training courses are also often conducted across the nation. My Saudi should have been high educated, in general more educated, easier to communicate.

#### 4.1.3 Management way I may take

Personally I think in Chinese micro-management area, there are typically two kinds of management method:

Method A: Friend management way, chef handles subordinates just like friends; they are working together, giving orders, receiving orders all in a cozy manner. Criticizing, motivating subordinates maybe all by jokes. After work they are having dinner, entertaining together, sometimes with their family. Subordinates can also “tease” chef, but it doesn’t affect chef to give orders and subordinates to carry out orders. In the inner department they are friends, no superior and inferior difference, out department subordinates respect and maintain chef’s authority.

Method B: Tough management way, chef holds always certain distance to subordinates. Chef gives orders in “cold” way, no smiles, no joking. They maybe have dinner or entertain together with guests, but status difference apparently exists. Their families maybe know each other but no way familiar with each other. Chef criticizes or even blames subordinates.

Different chefs may take different ways according to their character, but normally in some State-owned firms method A relative prevails, in Joint-ventures, private firms method B is overwhelming, and in factories method A is “vogue” than in firms.

Chinese one side share some common values with westerners (thanks of the open door policy) such as: work ethic; entrepreneurial spirit; experience in business; gender equality (Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p5), another side Chinese share some common values in traditional area with Saudis, though Chinese and Saudis have different culture backgrounds, such as: sincerity; honor (face); family; respect olds, So I should take the method A to supervise the Saudi. I will not only try to make friend with him, but also let other subordinates make friend with him.

#### 4.1.3 Important issues to keep remember

-If he does something wrong, in order to save his “face”, I will criticize him in a “soft” way—with a joke or with praising in stead of criticizing such as: “In this way you have done excellently, next time try another way, it will maybe get better result”.

-I will very frequently and let other co-workers frequently say “How are you” to him and mention about his relatives, but never female relative.

-Invite him and his family with other co-workers and co-workers families to have dinner together, but no alcohol, no pork and females will have to have the dinner in separate room.

-Speak with him or chat with him after work, I will say loudly to show my sincerity, but never touch Israel, or other Middle East politic issues.

#### 4.1.4 Difficult problems may encounter

-He wants pray during working time.

In his country he can freely do so during working time. If he applies it to me, I will permit him, he can pray at his office at any time and try to let other co-workers not be “jealous” him, do best to let him catch up with his working task—according to Assumption 3 he is very important for our firm.

-He complains that some female co-workers are having too “naked”, or when he visits a client, there is a young lady with very “modern” clothes, or a modern lady from our important client having “modern” clothes to visit us.

For first situation, it is relative easy to cope with, it’s in our own firm, I can let her have properly or exchange her with other department or not let them see each other when she has “naked” clothes (Though in Chinese firms, it is normal proper clothes to be required, maybe it is proper in China, not proper in our important Saudi’s eyes.), for later two situations, only way I can do is to let him not encounter this dangerous situation—call the client to ask whether they have a modern lady, when a modern young lady visits not arrange Saudi to meet and explain reasons both to clients and Saudi.

-If he refuses to have firm suit, which is a must according to firm’s regulation, and stick to have his traditional clothes.

Report to the controlling department to ask for a “except”

-If he always is late with appointment.

I will politely remind him sincerely, that in China on time is a politeness. (In Saudi Arabia maybe it is a common phenomenon not to be punctual.)

Sure, it will have many conflicts, I will handle those problems under one rule: whether the issues touch basic principles, if touch, I will make Saudi change mind, if not, I will satisfy him, all in all sincerity is most important.

#### 4.2 I am a business representative in Saudi Arabia

##### 4.2.1 Team building

-No left-handed in the team

It is difficult to make a left-handed member always use right hand in Saudi Arabia

-As fewer female members in the team as I can

Not all females agree to have conservative and all the time take a scarf as emergency needs—Saudi Arabia has specially religion policemen “Matawain” to enforce the modesty of dress in public and have full civil authority to arrest violators. I could not waste time to handle such kind of headache trivialities, and women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia.

-Relative elder and married members

On the one hand married members with their family together living in Saudi Arabia will help to deal with “boring” life, on the other hand elders will show maturity, civilization which is easy to win respect from Saudis (Saudis respect old).

##### 4.2.2 Preparation

-Training all members and their spouses

Invite “expert” who is familiar with Saudi Arabia customs from Chinese embassy or any other organizations to give the lectures. The lectures should cover including:

Main contents of Islam religion

Main difference between our culture and Saudi Arabia’s culture

Which areas should we specially take care?

How to dress properly

How to greet people

How to set appointment

-Business investigation and objectives setting

Who are our customers?

How are their backgrounds

Family connections, we can get such information, Saudis like to boast their family

Business coverage, relevant levels with our business

Attitudes for Chinese, did they communicate with Chinese before, how are their impressions

Hobbies, special customs, negotiation characters, etc.

Which objectives should we get when communicate with them

Which skills should we take, how can we start our communicating with them

Which behaviors should we act, should we create new patterns of behavior incorporating in Saudis Culture?

We shall adjust our objectives and communication styles according to different circumstance. This part is about some special behaviors in response to concrete customers, next I would like to list our general behaviors which we should act in Saudi Arabia,

##### 4.2.3 General behaviors

-Dressing

- Wear conservative and modest style clothing; well cover body--even in extreme temperatures. Such as, always with jacket, necktie, long trousers, shirt (long-sleeved and buttoned up to the collarbone).

- No wearing of neck jewellery by men, it is forbidden by Saudi law, there is dangerousness of being arrested for neglecting to observe this rule.

- Women members always keep a scarf on hand (it is not necessarily to so but it is a wise way

- Women members dress modestly at all times: pack shirts, blouses, high necklines and sleeves reach at least to the elbows. Hemlines will be ankle-length or well below the knee.

- No wearing native clothing, such as robes and headdresses (It will be considered as offensive to Saudis).

-Making appointments

- Try to find a prominent Saudi as sponsor to arrange appointments with the appropriate contacts.
- Make only one appointment per day. Because in Saudi business culture punctuality is not as much of a priority.
- Keep patient when appointments are interrupted in the form of phone calls or visiting from our counterpart's friends and family. Moreover, or several other businesspeople present and several meetings occurring simultaneously.

-Entertaining

- Remove shoes before entering a home or other building. Follow the lead of your host.
- Eat exclusively with your right hand and take only the food that is offered to you.
- Eat as much as we can, because in Saudi culture eating large quantities of food is considered the proper way to express appreciation for a meal.
- Praise the food, but not draw attention to the wives, mothers or sisters who prepared it.
- Not mention unpleasant matters such as illness, misfortune, accidents or death.

-Negotiation (Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p6)

- Always be honest and just.
- Loud and rhetorically speak to our customers.

Loud means sincerity in Arabic culture. "if an Arab says exactly what he means without the expected assertion, other Arabs may still think he means the opposite" (Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, 1998 p99). The Gulf War took place partly because President Bush spoke softly; Saddam did not believe he meant what he said (about declaring war etc.). Richard D. Lewis, 2003, p6)

- Show theatrical body language, such as flashing eyes; striking facial expression.
- Hold close distance with counterparts.
- Try to build personal relations let counterparts trust us before do business.
- Pay close attention to all family members.

Enquire regularly about the health (and happiness) of our counterparts' brother, uncles, cousins and sons, but never female members.

- Bargain with Saudis with all kinds of emotional arguments they like to do that.
- Observe their taboos and avoid irritant, praise even flatter them (but not admire their possessions too much).

-Develop deep relation

- When we know our customers finished journey and back to Saudi Arabia, to greet him in airport.
- When some male family members are ill in hospital, visit them and bring them proper gift: food, fruits etc.

#### 4.2.4 General Guidelines we have to keep remember

- Saudi officials work no more than six hours per day. Mornings are often the best times for appointments. Nevertheless, because of the summer heat, some Saudis prefer to work after dark and may request an evening appointment at any time until midnight.
- Business hours vary widely, but most businesses close early in the afternoon and reopen for a few hours in late afternoon.
- The work week runs from Saturday through Wednesday. Most people do not work on Thursdays; no business is conducted on Friday, the Muslim holy day.
- Government hours are 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Saturday through Wednesday.
- Banking hours are typically 8:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Saturday through Wednesday. Some banks keep Thursday morning hours as well.
- One cannot leave Saudi Arabia without an exit permit, regardless of the emergency.
- Saudis have great respect for the written word, especially if it has a religious connotation. One should avoid wrapping up anything in an Arabic-language newspaper, since it might contain Allah's name. Moreover, a copy of the Koran must be handled with tremendous care and respect.
- When sitting, keep both feet on the ground, since Arabs do not cross their legs when sitting. Moreover, exposing the bottom of foot is considered offensive.
- Although Saudis often like to gesture with their hands while speaking, pointing is considered extremely rude.

- The "thumbs up" sign is offensive throughout the Arab world.
- Ask for permission before taking photos of other people.
- Arabic is a language of hyperbole. For example, when a Saudi says "yes", he may actually mean "possibly." Although you should feel encouraged by these positive responses, it would be wrong to assume that the negotiating is over.
- Presents should never be alcohol perfumes containing alcohol pork pigskin products personal items such as underwear knives toy dogs or gifts that picture dogs images of nude or partially clad women (even in paintings or sculptures with artistic merit)

For taboos and special manners one should off course pay attention, it is also important experience and notice in the practice, which make Saudis embarrassing, which make them comfortable. I think that remembering taboos, gathering together regularly to feedback (self-monitoring and learning from mistakes) and share each other experiences collected in contacting with Saudis will be an effective way to make us succeed in Saudi Arabia.

#### 4.3 I am a negotiation team leader in China

Should Saudis—our business counterpart want to satisfy their China tour, sure there would do some studies about China, as well as Chinese culture, backgrounds of our company etc. What do they expect after studied our culture or what is shining the Chinese culture to Saudis: modesty; hospitality; patience or maybe negative side: corruption etc. We will retain our merits; change their negative impressions through contacting them during their short visit.

##### 4.3.1 Objectives

Successfully sign contract with them and develop high possibilities to do business in the future.

##### 4.3.2 Images we would like to impress them

Courtesy, Sincerity, Respect their culture, Long business potentiality, those factors must be passed to them via conversation, negotiation with them, arranging their visit etc.

##### 4.3.3 Measures

-Build a team

Try to find a pair of Chinese Muslims, it will make our guest more comfortable and also show that we respect Islam cultures, we have Muslims too, furthermore Muslims know their tenets, it may avoid some possible embarrassments.

Ensure no left-handed in the team.

-Train the team

- Use books, internet, TV and meet with people from Saudi Arabia's culture to get enough information about their taboos, custom etc.

- Try to find background information of our counterpart company through Chinese embassy in Saudi Arabia or Saudi embassy in China etc., China has a philosophy: know one, know counterpart, win always—that means when one is familiar with himself, in the same time one also is familiar with his counterpart, then he will win always.

- Invite teachers who are familiar with Saudi culture. (As 4.2.2 paragraph 1)

- Make a brochure for everyone of the team: which is noticeable, what should do what should not do.

- Identify every member's responsibilities: who will be in charge which fields etc.

-Set timetable and visit route

- Ensure no pork, no alcohol, no Left-handed servants in restaurants; , no "naked body" decorations in meeting room or similar occasions.

- Be care for whether there are Islam holy days during the visit.

-Send necessary information to them

- Such as timetable, preplanned visiting places, our attending team with detailed information, as well as photos.

- Ask about their opinion about intended arrangement.

- Require their information about their delegates, through that we can know their names status, after knew such information, we can also get further particulars about their family business scope etc. It is important to build a relation before business; Saudis are people-oriented, that we send photos etc. to them can give them a brief impression in advance.

-Anticipate problems may happen

Image any problems which may be encounter, and try to solve them, just like a drill, when they really happened, we can cope with them easily. There is a Chinese idiom: "prohibit any dangerousness possibilities, before they happen".

**-Greeting**

We are already friends—we know each other through exchanging information. Off course we can touch them and receive their kissing if they do.

**-Arranging visit and business meeting**

- Slowly come to business theme, first further familiar with each other, try to build “trust” atmosphere.
- Find right decision maker.
- Use similar skills (as 4.2.3) to negotiate with them, show our sincerity, respect with their culture.
- We are hard negotiator, but we are just and honest.
- Always active, extrovert, select right topic such as: sport, family, interesting Saudi appeals.
- Say “How are you” frequently during the visit.
- Observe their taboos, avoid irritants.

**-Find right gifts**

It might be Chinese traditional articles, will be selected according to the present principle. (Mentioned in 4.2.4)

When do business with a business party from different cultures it is always important to have respect for the other person, their beliefs and practices, but this does not mean in the least that you need lose your own sense of cultural identity and values. The ability to appreciate and build on cultural differences can lead to a richness and creativity in a relationship which would not result from one culture alone.

**References**

Jürgen Rothlauf, (1999). *Interkulturelles Management*. Oldenbourg. P403/ p361

Richard D. Lewis, (2003). National Cultural Profiles 2003 Saudi Arabia [Online] Available: [www.hilton-university.com/downloads/SaudiArabia.pdf](http://www.hilton-university.com/downloads/SaudiArabia.pdf)

Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, *Interculture Communication* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Wadsworth Publishing Company 1998 p99