
Keep It Down!

By Lothar Katz

Last summer, a friend of mine who has been living in the United States for many years returned from a vacation trip to his native country of England, accompanied by his wife and 11-year-old twins. Asked whether he learned anything of interest, he remarked: *"I've never before noticed how loud my kids are!"*

You may be familiar with the traditional British adage that "Children should be seen and not heard." Rest assured that this questionable piece of educational wisdom has largely fallen out of fashion. Fortunately, the country's kids no longer face the levels of parental pressure to eat, learn, and play in silence that were the norm back in the Victorian age. Nevertheless, my friend reported that English children seemed notably quieter than his own offspring, born and raised in the U.S. Could this be a cultural thing?

A safe answer is that cultural preferences at least have to do with it. To the experienced globetrotter, there can be little doubt that American children are commonly louder than British ones, Arab kids make young Finns look outright dumb, little Italians easily outdo their Japanese counterparts in the decibel department, and Mexican youngsters let German ones seem well behaved in comparison. While this is all relative, cultural factors obviously influence which levels of noise parents (and others around them) are willing to tolerate from the little ones.

A word of warning if you are doing business across borders: such differences are by no means limited to kids. You may find similar patterns –and a few surprises– in the 'grown-up world'.

Business Meetings

In most countries, business meetings are serious affairs, to be conducted in an attentive manner and at moderate volume. Loud and boisterous behavior may be read as a lack of serious interest in the subject at hand, or worse, as bad manners. Except for initial small talk, which can be lively in countries such as Brazil, Ireland, or in the Arab world, raised voices commonly indicate that something is wrong. It is acceptable for business discussions to become more heated in cultures where intense and passionate debate is a common way to resolve differences, such as France or Israel.

Businesspeople in most English-speaking countries tend to appreciate humor as a way to 'break the ice' and help the meeting atmosphere become more relaxed. Elsewhere, humor may be less appreciated. Laughing out loud during a business meeting in a country such as Japan or Indonesia could create unpleasant interruptions you'll want to avoid. It is generally less risky to be viewed overly sincere than not sincere enough, as the latter might affect your counterparts' willingness to trust you.

Business Meals & Entertainment

Business interactions away from the meeting room commonly follow different protocols. Europeans across several countries, as well as quite a few Latin Americans, frequently complain about the 'noisiness' exhibited during meals by visiting U.S.-Americans, who in

turn tend to find the atmosphere stiff and boring. Indeed, business dinners in France are often quieter affairs than daytime meetings in the country are, and it is paramount here to 'keep it down' when dining at a business restaurant. In Asia, such customs depend to a greater degree on the formality of the event. The same group of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese business partners that appeared rather restrained during last night's honorary banquet may be an exuberant bunch at today's more relaxed business dinner, a transformation you'll rarely experience in places such as France, Switzerland, or South Africa.

A final aspect to consider is that in many countries, people draw a clear line between business and social settings. While business dinners or office parties call for controlled and somewhat muted behaviors, grill parties or football/soccer matches can be rowdy affairs. A German counterpart, for instance, may seem rather reserved in all of your business interactions, while you might discover a real 'party animal' in that same person when meeting him at a mutual friend's Saturday night party.

What To Do?

Knowing others' expectations always helps. When it comes to 'adjusting your volume,' however, these greatly depend on cultural background *and* situational context. What matters most is not to make your foreign counterparts uncomfortable, so when in doubt, seek guidance from that line so popular among Americans traveling abroad: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But be warned: you may find it harder to adjust your habits than you expect!

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
