## Cultural Literacy in the Workplace – audio transcript

The city's bustling and you're about to begin possibly the most important business meeting of your career. You and your manager are meeting with another duo from a firm in China to hopefully sign into a long-term partnership. At the beginning of the meeting, you greet the firm's CEO and insist that the pair can sit wherever they want to in the conference room. But within 30 minutes, they're out the door and no partnership has been made. Wait, only 30 minutes? No partnership was made? What went wrong? Well, this is where knowing about another country's culture comes into play. If you had done some research beforehand, you'd realize that Chinese people value the hierarchy. Since you weren't the boss, you shouldn't have been the one to greet the other company's CEO. And their CEO should have been given a designated spot to sit, probably at one end of the table. So what are we even talking about that's so important? Well, cultural literacy.

According to literary critic E.D. Hirsch, Cultural literacy refers to the ability to analyze and understand a particular society or culture, and it also consists of the familiarity with the customs and characteristics of a culture. In an educational review done at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, it was found that 80% of HR professionals believed that cultural assimilation was one of the main challenges that business leaders faced while working abroad. So why is cultural literacy so important? Well, every culture is unique and should be respected. What is appropriate in one culture may be taboo in another, so understanding these differences can allow you to more easily adapt to different foreign societies if you ever go abroad. However, it's not just important because you don't want to offend others, but also it shows your character since others will acknowledge that you took the time to understand a different person's values, beliefs, mannerisms, and how their culture has shaped them into who they are today.

Now, I remember maybe 12 years ago, it was Bring Your Daughter to Work Day at my dad's workplace. Since he was the project chair in the engineering department at the VA, a majority of the day consisted of me constantly asking, hey, what is this drawing? What do these words mean? But in the afternoon, he was supposed to meet someone who just transferred from another hospital to his department, and my dad thought it was casual enough for me to join him as well. The new employee walks into my dad's office, and he's a relatively young, non-Asian male. Maybe in his late 20s. But as my dad stands up and extends his arm for a handshake, the man suddenly starts bowing and saying, Oh, are you Japanese? Konnichiwa. Hmm. Not that it mattered in the situation, but we're not Japanese. Then on top of that, he pointed to me and said, Oh, is this your daughter? You must have wanted a son first, right? And well, I'm guessing he was referring to China's one-child policy at the time, but that's where things got really uncomfortable. And let's just say that I never heard about that man again.

So to prevent this type of thing from happening, make it a priority to learn and understand the different cultures around you and around the world. I've applied the concept of cultural literacy to the business world, but it comes into play in our daily lives. From meeting new friends to traveling to another country for vacation, it's important to try your best and understand the different cultural backgrounds that shape those individuals and countries. So remember, Ignorance is not an excuse. So keep on learning and experiencing each and every day. Thanks for tuning in.