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**Language of Corporate Dress in  
Cross-cultural Business Communication**

**Lubomir Stoykov, Ph.D.**

# LANGUAGE OF CORPORATE DRESS IN CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Lubomir Stoykov, Ph.D.

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## IMPORTANCE OF CORPORATE DRESS

Corporate dress is an essential part of cross-cultural business communication and the lack of knowledge of its main codes, depending on the respective race, religion, ethnos, traditions and habits, can cause frustration, misunderstanding and even failure in communication between managers from different geographic spaces (More on business communication and corporate dress can be found in: Stoykov, Pacheva, 2005: 379-439).

What is the language of corporate dress in communication between managers and entrepreneurs of different cultures, races and ethnos?

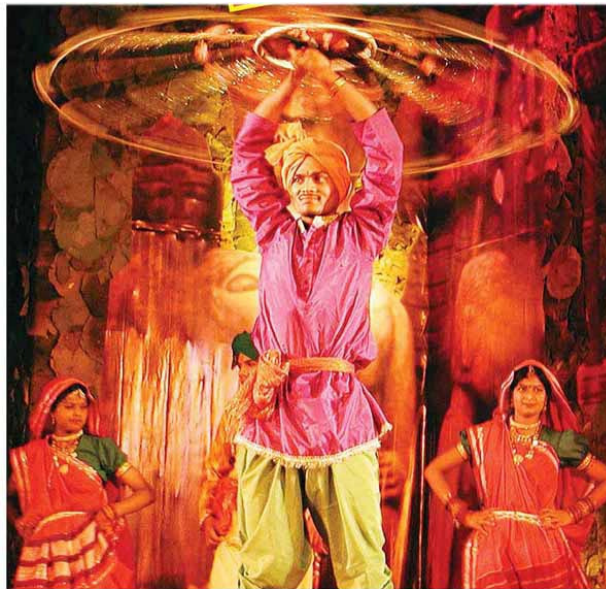
## CLOTHES AND BODY LANGUAGE

Clothes, as civilisation modality and part of body language, help people a lot in their mutual understanding in the process of their communication. Things are further complicated, when we talk of contacts and meetings between representatives of different cultures, different value systems, which as systems might have many

similarities, but differ significantly in the way of expression, in the use of symbols and signs in business dress.

The American author Nancy Adler writes: “Cross-cultural communication is realized when a representative of one culture sends a message to a representative of a different culture. This communication fails when the receiver does not comprehend the message of the sender” (Adler, 1986: 183).

## **BUSINESS DRESS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**



The connection between business dress and cross-cultural communication is more than obvious. It provides lots of knowledge and information, which is applicable partially or wholly to the field of journalism, politics, diplomacy, pedagogy and a number of other communicative professions.

Corporate dress in the context of cross-cultural communication is a valuable and irreplaceable indicator for the similarities and differences of the various cultural



systems, human groups, as well as the

common cultural tendencies, adaptive mechanisms, the character of the anthropologic dynamics and specifics of the means for fulfilment of certain needs

The constant crossing in the space of messages, sent through signs, gestures, mimics and poses, as well as dress and its components, undoubtedly enriches the different cultures and contributes to the multicolourfulness of international business. Looking into the best foreign models of style of dressing and behavioural practice, functionality of contacts and their respective infiltration and adaptation promises prosperity and guaranteed progress in the good working relationship between business representatives of different nationalities.

Another major subject, which will not be focus of our research in this paper, are the regulated and unregulated ways of ethnical identification through dress and accessories (wearing turbans or fez in combination with modern business suits and ties by employees of respectable offices and others, which often cause tension and discussions both in the society and the authority organs and structures).

## **MAIN FACTORS**

Let us look briefly at the main factors for construction and formation of corporate dress.

### **1. Factors for corporate dress**

Dress style in corporate organizations is usually constructed under the influence of three factors.

- **The first factor** is related to the general requirement to corporate or company dress: it should inspire trustworthiness, bring in an element of formality and be related to the maximum to the functional definiteness of the respective employee.
- **The second factor** includes the existing in the offices symbolical, sign and colour criteria, which are an inseparable part of the corporate image. That is, corporate dress is a powerful instrument for expressing belonging to a given organizational community.
- **The third factor** is of a mixed nature. It is influenced by some cultural and ethnical influences, fashion tendencies for volume, silhouette, fabric and colour (even though not strongly), as well as the subcultural and informal ideas and preferences of the employees, which, however, can be introduced only after a sanction by the management or an order of the top managers.

## **HIERARCHY AND DRESSING STYLE**

Is there a difference in the dressing style of employees at different positions in the organization hierarchy? In order to answer this question, we need to take into consideration the fact that apart from the rigid hierarchical structures – army officers, staff of the aviation and navy, policemen, fire fighters, employees of the post offices, public transport, dispatchers, couriers, people involved in repair and road building works, etc, in which the signal-sign side of dress is clearly determined and stressed,

we cannot talk of a fundamental difference in the dress of employees at the different levels in a certain organization.

Any dissonance comes rather from the individual taste and its corresponding manner of dressing, as well as the financial resources and the taste for the luxurious, expensive and modern clothing. If we ask one of the most prominent experts on business dress in the world – the famous researcher of the successful looks, John Molloy, we will find out that he recommends that your clothes should correspond with that of your colleagues who are equal to you; that your dress should harmonize with the clothes of the more well-to-do of the middle class; to be made from natural materials; not to stress your sexual appeal and to be more conservative than the clothes of at least half of your colleagues (Molloy, 1996).

## 2. Cultural differences in corporate dress

An improvised look into the way businessmen and entrepreneurs, representatives of different culture<sup>1</sup> dress, will show that **Australians** wear what is fashionable in Europe and North America, i.e. at work men wear conservative jackets and ties, and in the summer months jackets are removed (See: Put Your Best Foot Forward, 2007). Women usually wear skirts and blouses or dresses. Brazilians wear conservative suits, shirts and ties in business situations.

**In Brazil** if you wear a three-piece suit, it means that you are an executive, and if this is a two-piece suit, it signifies that you are an office employee. Brazilian women dress “sexy” in all kinds of situations. Foreign women who want to blend in should avoid wearing overly formal, conservative dress. Brazilian business ladies should wear feminine dresses or pantsuits and avoid "dressing like a man."

**What do business people in Mexico wear?** Mexican businessmen always wear a shirt and a tie, of course with exception to informal cases. Both men and women dress in a conservative fashion. Colours, which are recommended are navy blue and dark grey. Women should always wear make-up.

**Corporate dress of Chinese managers** and employees is conservative, simple, unpretentious and modest. Flashy and ultramodern clothes are not recommendable. In China women avoid wearing bareback dresses, low-cut tops, shorts and excessive jewellery. In the workplace men need to wear sports coats and ties. Casual and open-necked shirts are comfortable to wear at working meetings during the summer. Jackets and ties are not needed during the summer season. Women have to wear dresses and pantsuits at work and avoid heavy make-up and gaudy jewellery.

**Corporate dress in Israel** is very similar to the business clothes in the USA and Europe. It is both conservative and casual. Ties are not always obligatory, and shirts are often open-necked. Long-sleeve shirts are not obligatory either, because in the summer you can see lots of businessmen, dressed in short-sleeve shirts and bright colours. Religion has its say in the outlook of business people. When visiting holy places women should avoid low-cut tops and their sleeves should be at least up to the

elbow. Covering clothes are a rule for women. Characteristic of business style are simple and modest clothes, both for men and women.

**Business style of dressing in India** involves modesty, comfort and business look. For men, this means wearing a formal or semi-formal suit, shirt and tie, and in the summer it is normal to wear only a shirt. Corporate dress for the Indian business lady requires simpler and conservative clothes, such as a pantsuit or dresses in the spirit of modesty and functionalism.



**In Singapore** lots of different attires are accepted due to the different ethnical styles and the modern character of this country. Dress is usually informal, casual. Western clothes are also very common. At work, men usually do not dress in jackets and wear white shirts, ties and slacks. Women dress in blouses with sleeves, skirts or pantsuits.

**In Hong Kong** humbleness and cleanliness of business clothing are very important. All types of clothes are worn there. The taste and fashion are rather Japanese-like, than British or American. Clothes are lighter in the summer, and sweaters and jackets are worn in the winter. In the workplace men have to wear conservative lightweight Western-style suits and ties, and conservative dresses, suits, skirts and blouses are a must for women.

**Italy**, which to a great extent today dictates the world fashion in dress, is an example of the perfect attitude towards the corporate style of grooming the outside appearance. Propriety and formality are a leading trademark of Italian culture. Good looks are a signal of good social position. Formal dress is preferable for business people. This is a principle valid for women and men involved in business. Well-designed dark suits and elegant ties are a must in men's business style. Fabrics are all of good quality – raw wool, well-processed cotton and silk. Expensive men's accessories are also of great importance – watches, belts, and wallets. Lady's successful wear is also exclusively elegant and made from expensive materials. Italian women are more generous when it comes to jewellery and make-up and they are definitely "beating" American women in relation to those. To sum up: "What is important in this culture is

things (as well as people) to look good: appearance is often considered more important than “what is inside””.

**What is corporate dress in Germany like?** Compared to American businessmen, German business people dress more conservatively, women avoid excessive jewellery and ultra expensive accessories. Dark, conservative suits are acceptable for men and women. In comparison to lots of their European colleagues German managers dress a lot simpler and even boring. This rigidness and discipline have reflected on the fact that informal everyday or casual and sloppy clothes are not looked at with approval.

Everybody knows that **the French** are the world leaders of fashion. Cleanliness and smart dress are a key principle for them. And even though in the guides on national business characteristics of dress French men are “marked” as preferring conservative suits and ties, and women – conservative suits and pantsuits (or also called - *tailleurs*) and dresses, we need to mention here that what is noticeable in their business style is a certain dose of artistic and romantic nature. Businessmen usually wear a silk handkerchief in the top left pocket – a sign of formality, festivity, authority and fashion attitude, and business women wear beautiful scarves, fichus and hats.

**For Russian business people** it is characteristic that they spend lots of money on good corporate dress. There is even a claim that they are the nation who spends most money from the family budget on clothes. Men usually wear suits and ties, but are trying to change and vary them every day or for particular meetings, assemblies and conferences. White shirts and dark suits are for special events. Grey, blue and brown colours are the preferred colours for the normal corporate dress. Long-sleeve blouses and skirts below the knee are the most common versions of the lady’s business suit. Jeans and trainers are more rarely worn as everyday business dress. It is curious that the most successful Russian businessmen spend a great amount of money on “Armani”, “Gucci” and “Versace”, and if they cannot afford these brands they prefer to have their suits made, rather than buy cheap confectionery.

## **VARIETIES GALORE!**

The described versions of the language of corporate dress in cross-cultural business communication are only a little part of the existing world variety in regards to the dressing manner and the constitution of the corporate dress code respective for every nation, ethnos and culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

What does this not exhaustive analysis of the characteristics of business dress in the different countries show?

**First**, what is dominant is the official and serious attitude towards corporate dress and its leading criteria for modesty, comfort, balance, cleanliness and smartness.

**Second**, cross-cultural differences are as if less and less noticeable in the business dressing style, as though through it the representatives of different cultures are trying (successfully) to harmonize the dissonances. A really eloquent example for this are the meetings at top level between presidents of countries from different continents and

cultures or the regular assemblies of presidents and prime ministers of G-8, in which all attendees look absolutely the same in terms of clothing.

**Third**, corporate dress of the representatives of different religions and cultures facilitates, rather than complicates, cross-cultural business communication, namely because it tries to follow the already set and tested in the long-year practice dress codes in the organizational sphere of the most developed in terms of technology and information countries.

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<sup>1</sup> The provided ideas, observations and conclusions here and below, have been adapted on the basis of: *Country Profiles* (2007). In: CareerJournal.com.

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