



Image builder: Susan Matheson

"If you're not considering culture as an influence these days, it's considered irresponsible," she said. "Firms that see patterns of lost business and an increase of frustration among their own people find, after looking at other factors, that they keep coming back to culture."

It's a touchy subject, as no one wants to point to an issue as being cultural, but it's a very emotional and very personal thing. "You have to understand in the business world that people bring other cultural filters with them," she said. "It's a huge factor in success, or lack of success, in communication."

You can prepare in advance, she said. Cultural intelligence has three main components. First, you must know what culture, in general, is. It's understanding that the other person has a different range of experiences, perspectives and filters, even when sitting at the lunch table.

"Culture is very deep-seated. Culture is an iceberg, and clothes and meals are just the tip," she said. Down below, the very deep-seated part of culture is the methods of communication. "The more deep they are, the less we are aware of them."

The second step is mindfulness – knowing specifically what those deep-seated aspects are. Be prepared to encounter them.

The final step is adapting our behaviour – not totally, but making concessions. Adopt some niceties to facilitate communication, she said. "What I'm saying is incorporate basic civility, grace and courtesy. Part of it is understanding that basic etiquette aspects are really culturally based." ■