

SITUATION

This explains the situation and introduces the main characters.

A**DISCUSS**

People may make very quick judgements about us when we meet them for the first time – some positive and some negative. We can manage this partly by trying to be friendly, polite and professional. However, when working across cultures it is very difficult to give clear advice about making a positive impression because what one person sees as friendly, polite and professional in their own culture may be seen very differently by others – even as unfriendly, impolite and unprofessional.

VIEW

- 1 It is very important because business is based on relationships, and first meetings are their starting point.
- 2 Because people can have different views about what is polite and so have different expectations.
- 3 Because it can seem too personal, too fast and too 'noisy' in some cultures. In some cultures, silence is preferred, and talking is seen as 'noise', i.e. not useful and possibly irritating.

REFLECT

- 2 It's difficult to generalise in this way, precisely because people are very different and come to first meetings with a wide range of expectations. However, it's useful to observe very carefully the person in front of you, as their behaviour will give you clues about what they expect and find polite, which you can then use to decide how you should behave.

B**VIEW**

- 1 It is common for people to note down that Rachel handles the first meeting badly. She seems rude, particularly the way she takes a message on her phone and seems to ignore Lucas. People might see Lucas as quite friendly but trying too hard to make the conversation work.

REFLECT

Look at the balance of neutral, negative and positive comments which you made about Lucas and Rachel. Is the balance equal, or did you make more positive or negative comments? These first impressions might include non-verbal cues such as their body language, as well as what they say.

C**VIEW**

- 1 Most people would usually focus on the negative and criticise their behaviour.
- 2 Think positively and look for qualities and skills which others have, to find ways to work together.

VIEW AGAIN

When we practise open and positive thinking, we often try to imagine the positive intentions of other people which motivates the behaviour which we see, and might first judge critically.

REFLECT

People might judge Rachel and Lucas more positively when they view the meeting a second time. This highlights that it can be unfair and inaccurate to judge negatively too quickly during first meetings.

D**VIEW**

Bob makes the following points about Rachel and Lucas.

Lucas:

- Looks as though he's arrived on time for the meeting, possibly well organised and sensitive to schedules and deadlines.
- Makes a real effort at conversation, to come across as friendly and polite.
- Lots of smiles and humour about travel problems, positive comments about the building, gives time for small talk.
- Maybe he's a people person, who understands that relationships are important in business.

Rachel:

- Says welcome, asks about the journey, if there was a problem; checks that Lucas can manage with his luggage.
- On her phone, but it could be really important, e.g. a customer, as she's possibly very customer-oriented.
- She seems focused and wants to get on with things.
- Also possibly people-focused, worried that the rest of the team is waiting upstairs.

REFLECT

Thinking too positively about other people may lead you to underestimate or even overlook parts of their character, e.g. selfishness, which may be a problem later on in the working relationship.

E

DISCUSS

Many communication experts recommend that we adapt our communication style to that of others. This makes others feel more comfortable and can make our communication more successful. Many people would see Rachel as relatively direct, with conviction and focused on results. As she is the leader of the team Lucas might decide to adapt his style to Rachel's. However, the risk is that this style may not be right for the other members of the team.

VIEW

Lucas has had time to reflect on this first meeting with Rachel and he now tries to adapt, to be flexible, and use a communication style which fits more to her expectations.

- 1 He shows conviction, focuses on results and efficiency, and is structured.
- 2 She says he has forgotten to mention the software which he uses in his region. Lucas stays calm and just gives the information which is asked for.
- 3 It looks as if he has been successful, as Rachel gives him positive feedback.

REFLECT

The two quotes show different attitudes to flexibility. The first could represent a more group-oriented culture where the focus is on fitting into the collective and not standing out in any way. The second is perhaps more typical of an individualist culture where it is acceptable to maintain a clear and unique identity – to be oneself.

F

DISCUSS

Lucas will possibly talk about parts of Rachel's behaviour which he found confusing, e.g. the rather rude way (for him) that she greeted him while reading text messages on her phone.

VIEW

- 1 He felt that she was a bit rude.
- 2 Her son was ill.
- 3 She has organised a social get-together for the team that evening. For Lucas, this shows that Rachel is aware of the importance of building strong relationships in project teams.
- 4 He feels happy about the day but cautious, as he recognises it is too early in the project to draw real conclusions.

REFLECT

- 2 This reflection on the status of working relationships, on the motivations of others, and on his own thinking and behaving, are generally constructive and will help to identify ways to improve.

G

DISCUSS

It's important not to jump to conclusions based on first impressions, as these impressions can be too negative. It can be useful to adjust your own behaviour to that of the person/culture you are meeting to make them feel comfortable. However, we cannot expect, as the guest, that our host will automatically adjust to ours.

VIEW

Bob's main conclusions are:

- Lucas learned that he was wrong to judge so quickly.
- Lucas consciously tries to be flexible. This flexibility can be a real success factor when working across cultures.
- Lucas demonstrates awareness, tolerance and flexibility - the most fundamental intercultural competencies.

PRACTICE

Cut up the cards and place face down in a pile on the table, allowing one for each trainee. Each trainee should take a card and study the behaviour, without showing it to others.

After the discussion, you could repeat the activity with a different card for each trainee, in order to observe how it changes the resulting conversations.