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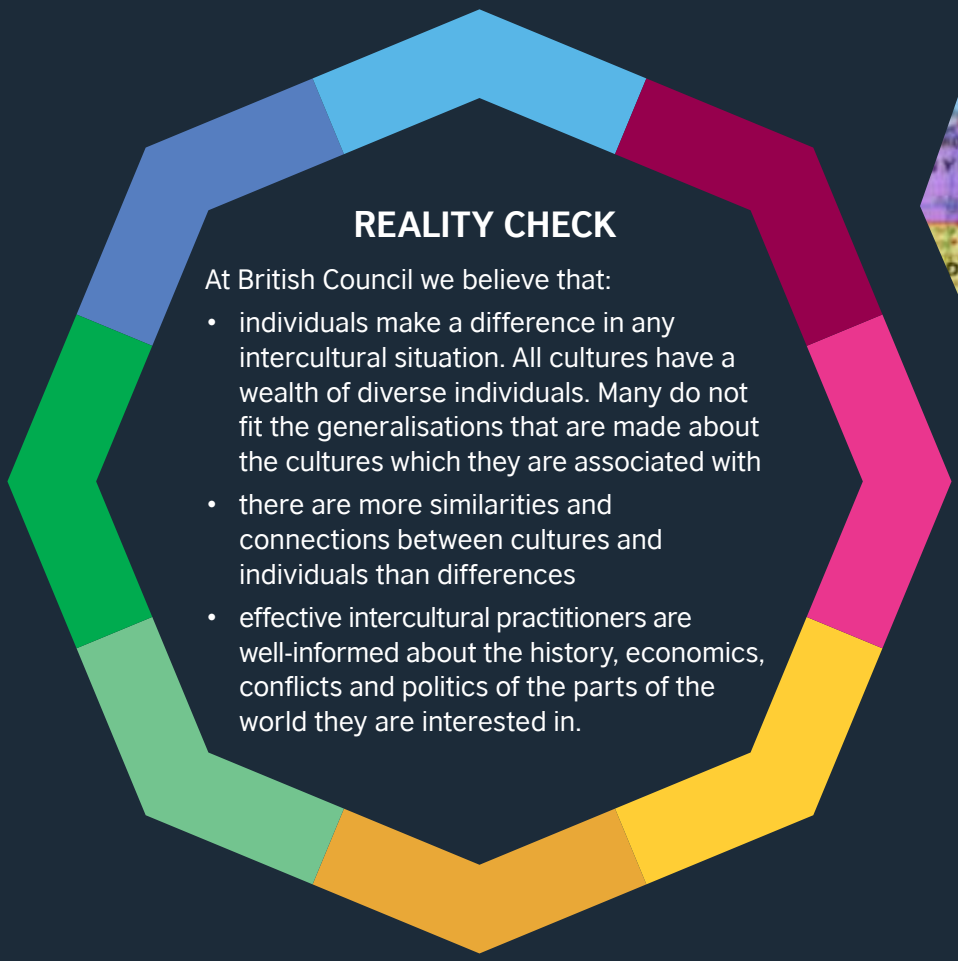
INTERCULTURAL FLUENCY

GLOBAL SKILLS FOR BUSINESS

CULTURAL TOP TIPS FOR UK BUSINESSES WORKING WITH THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA



THESE 'TOP TIPS' HAVE BEEN PRODUCED BY OUR INTERCULTURAL PRACTITIONERS AT BRITISH COUNCIL SAUDI ARABIA, THE MAJORITY OF WHOM ARE SAUDI CITIZENS



REALITY CHECK

At British Council we believe that:

- individuals make a difference in any intercultural situation. All cultures have a wealth of diverse individuals. Many do not fit the generalisations that are made about the cultures which they are associated with
- there are more similarities and connections between cultures and individuals than differences
- effective intercultural practitioners are well-informed about the history, economics, conflicts and politics of the parts of the world they are interested in.



WHILE PROVIDING 'TOP TIPS' ABOUT WHAT IS TYPICAL ABOUT A PARTICULAR GROUP OF PEOPLE CAN BE USEFUL, IT IS NEVER ENOUGH.

Equally important are being aware:

- of the cultural behaviours and values that you bring to the mix and being able to adjust these to complement the situations you find yourself in. This does not mean disregarding the values that are important to you but being open to and respecting difference.
- of the intercultural expertise of the people that you are working with. You may be fortunate to be working with counterparts who have high levels of intercultural fluency who 'tune-in' to your cultural preferences and adjust to make you feel comfortable.
- that much depends on context. What is expected and appropriate will depend on:
  - the type of organisation you are dealing with
  - the locale (urban or rural)
  - the status, age and seniority of your contacts
  - whether you are meeting in public or in somebody's home
  - that in most countries there are many cultures and sub-cultures. Cities and regions and younger and older generations often have their own distinct characteristics.

We hope you find our cultural top tips a useful starting point for working in new cultural situations. British Council can support you in developing deeper cultural insights and in acquiring the skills for effective intercultural practice. **Contact us** (intercultural.fluency@britishcouncil.org) or see the **Intercultural Fluency webpage** for more details (www.britishcouncil.org /education/skills-employability/intercultural-fluency)

1 EARN TRUST BEFORE DOING BUSINESS

Saudi people expect to work with those they know and trust so investing time in relationship-building is worthwhile

Having a good personal relationship is an important element of successful business in Saudi.

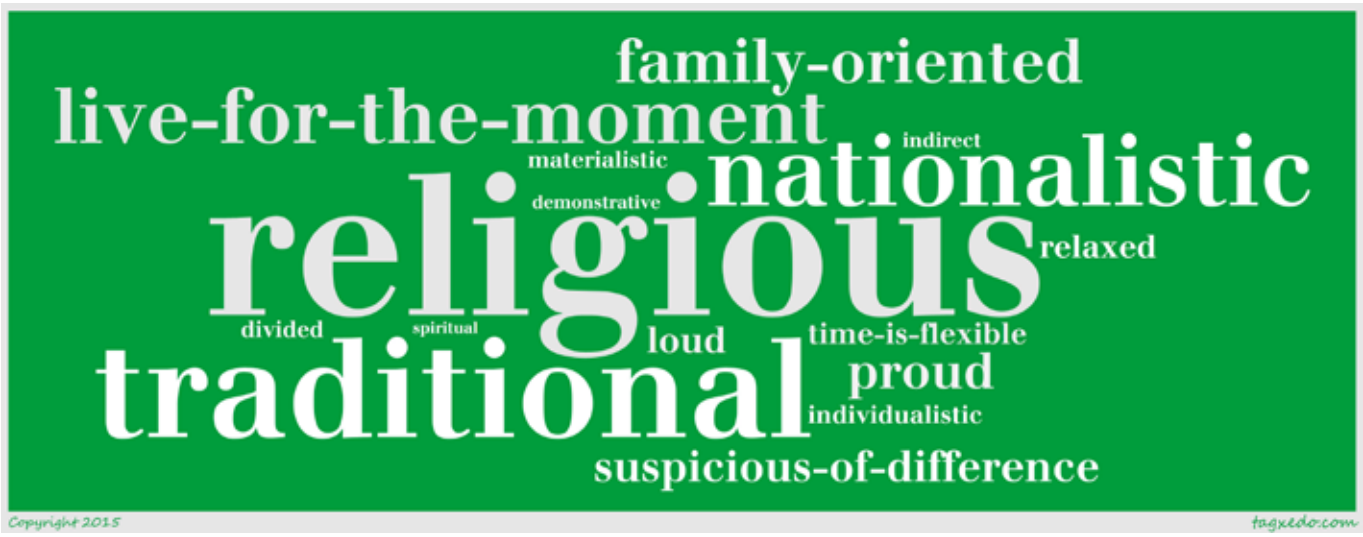
Knowing and respecting the basic concepts of Islam are also a good foundation for earning trust.

It is important not to rush a Saudi business person into a business agreement or to appear impatient. Don't expect to discuss the details of business during early meetings; instead, socialise and find out about each other. However, avoid asking about a Saudi businessman's female relatives.

Body language is an important expression of culture and building rapport. Direct eye contact between men shows respect. Avoiding eye contact can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. It is the opposite between men and women, i.e. direct eye contact between men and women is disrespectful. When crossing your legs, make sure you don't show the soles of your feet. This is insulting.

A high value is placed on hospitality. Guests should never flatly refuse refreshments like coffee, tea and dates. They should at least accept the first round of offerings. Alcohol is taboo in Saudi Arabia, as well as being illegal, and so it should never be offered in a meeting or as a gift, and should be avoided as a topic of conversation.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA LIKE?



Data from the British Council's 'Cultural Preferences Survey', carried out in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2014. Survey respondents were asked to read a substantial list of words and phrases and decide which eight of these represent the characteristics of the people of Saudi Arabia. The size of each characteristic in the image corresponds to the percentage of participants who selected it.

2 EXPECT PUBLIC INTERACTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN TO BE LIMITED, EVEN IN BUSINESS SETTINGS

Business tends to be done between men. Women from the UK will find conducting business more challenging than their male counterparts.

Adapting behaviours and clothing to reflect local conventions is particularly important for women, especially when establishing new business relationships.

In public, all women are expected to wear an abaya (a light, black covering in the shape of a gown). Indoors, women's clothing should be loose-fitting and cover their collarbone, elbow and knees.

In public places, such as restaurants, a businesswoman is expected to have a male in her party when meeting with Saudi businessmen. In extreme cases, men may refuse to meet if a woman is in the party.

In general, foreign businesswomen are accepted although there may be some discomfort about this. However, things are changing and the position of women in business in Saudi is improving.





3 ADJUST TO LOCAL VIEWS ABOUT TIME: PRAYER TIMES ARE NOT FLEXIBLE - EVERYTHING ELSE IS

Time is viewed in two contrasting ways: Prayer times and important religious festivals are fixed. Business and personal appointments and meeting times are flexible.

People are flexible about being on time for work or pleasure and scheduling several meetings on the same day is unadvisable. Each meeting will probably take longer than you expect and time has to be built in for prayers.

There are important times and dates that should be taken into consideration when organising business events or meetings:

The daily prayer times

Saudi people pray five times a day. Meetings are often loosely scheduled around set prayer times. During prayer times all shops are closed. The exact time of the prayers are listed in the local newspapers each day.

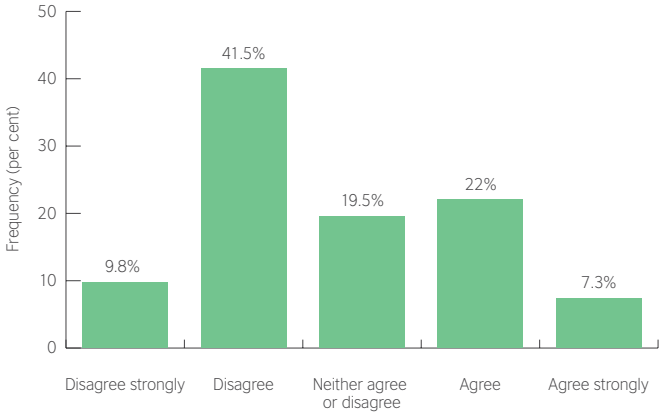
Ramadan

During the fasting month of Ramadan, businesses slow down noticeably. Many companies change their working hours from day to night, some companies use this period to do maintenance work. A consequence of this is that business visits or events should be avoided during the month of Ramadan.

Eids

The two most important local holidays are the three days at the end of Ramadan, called Eid-Al-Fitr, and the two days that celebrate pilgrims visiting the holy city of Mecca, called Eid Al-Adha. Check the dates for the respective current year and do not set up any meetings during this time.

In Saudi Arabia punctuality is important



The weight of opinion in the British Council's cultural preferences survey about Saudi Arabia favours the statement that punctuality is *not* important in Saudi Arabian culture. However, the variety of opinion suggests that the context is important.



4 ADJUST YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

Saudis tend to favour a more indirect communication style.

It is important to take time with pleasantries, such as asking about a person's family (but not female relatives) and health, before getting to the purpose of business. Familial and business hierarchy plays a big role in communication and it is best to defer to the eldest and most senior member of a group. Using colleagues' titles (mister, doctor or professor) and the given name shows respect.

People tend to be loud and this may appear aggressive to UK ears but this is usually a positive sign of engagement and interest. If your preferred communication style is being quiet and reserved, your Saudi colleagues may think something is wrong.

'Saving face' is important. Be careful about how you use criticism as it may not be interpreted as you intend. Your Saudi counterpart is unlikely to criticise you openly. He is more likely to suggest that some changes are needed or say nothing. Offering compliments is important and expected, especially when establishing new relationships. You will be complimented in return and accept these graciously.

5 FOLLOW THE LEAD OF YOUR SAUDI COUNTERPART WHEN MEETING AND GREETING

There are many variations on meeting and greeting so it is better to take a lead from your counterpart.

Men are comfortable standing closer to each other than would be typical in the UK and greet each other warmly. This is likely to involve a strong handshake (right hand only) and embracing with possibly one to three kisses on alternating cheeks, depending on the level of familiarity. Men also hold hands and touch each other more than tends to happen in the UK. There is little to no touching between men and women during greetings in public

Saudi women have a similar range of familiar greetings between themselves.



Meaningful and effective intercultural engagement is at the heart of the British Council's vision, mission, and values. We have 80 years of experience in cultivating cultural relations and we work on the ground in over 100 countries. These top tips have been produced by our intercultural practitioners at British Council Saudi Arabia, the majority of whom are Saudi citizens.

Kingdom tower in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



PHOTOGRAPHY

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