Why being 'all business' may leave Americans behind

By Stacy A. Teicher

Focus on the task at hand. Hold back your own emotions during meetings. When giving feedback to a colleague, don't worry about hurting his feelings.

Sound familiar? These are some of the expectations built into the Protestant-rooted American work ethic. But for all the productivity this approach has spawned in American business, it may now be a barrier to the kind of cross-cultural communication that's in demand, according to Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, a psychologist and business professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

His research shows that Americans' emotional detachment at work translates into inattention to indirect cues. By contrast, in most other cultures - from East Asia to Latin America - concern about interpersonal harmony at work is expected, and communicating indirectly can help people "save face."

"When you're crossing these cultural divides, it will put you at a disadvantage if you're not aware of what's going on," Mr. Sanchez-Burks says. "It's useless to argue which style is better. The fact that things are so diverse requires people to learn how to coordinate their style and be much more vigilant [regarding] the interpersonal and emotional dimension of workplace situations."

It's not that Americans are always less sensitive to body language or tone of voice. Sanchez-Burks and colleagues in Korea and China have found that the differences in work settings don't extend to social situations.

For instance, Americans and East Asians were given a paragraph evaluating someone's performance on a task. Some were told it was a workplace evaluation; others that it was feedback from a friend. East Asians interpreted the text similarly regardless of the source. Americans took it literally if they thought it was from the workplace, but looked for indirect meaning if it was from a friend.

"Rather than just say, 'Diversity means we see things in different ways,' this is a concrete difference people can focus on," Sanchez-Burks says.

Participants in the Transnational Executive MBA (TEMBA) program at California State University, Hayward, recently discovered that it can be too much of a good thing if both sides adapt their styles. During a recent negotiation exercise in Brazil, TEMBA students went in intending to establish personal connections. "When you go to a business meeting in Brazil ... it's a very social atmosphere," says TEMBA associate director Kathy Warren. But the Brazilians, well-coached in American style, were expecting to get right down to business.

"You can overstudy," Ms. Warren says with a laugh.