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# Authentic Liaisons: Creating Bridges across Cultures



By Henrik Bresman , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

**A genuine and sincere attitude can break down the most complex of cross-cultural barriers.**

Flying in to Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, Renan Bourdeau looked down at the endless stretches of desert below and wondered how people survived.

As a communications company executive who specialised in writing country reports to promote national economies and attract foreign investors, Bourdeau was no stranger to exotic lands. Experienced as he was in working with different cultural approaches to business, he knew nothing of Mauritania, one of Africa's poorest countries. According to his company's guide book – a “bible” which contained details of its previous assignments in the region and the insights gained – the country was controlled by the Moors who held office in Nouakchott while their extended families lived a more nomadic way of life in the desert.

**Social customs to bridge cultural chasms**

The pace and style of business in the capital was based on Bedouin social courtesies and traditions which Bourdeau was keen to respect. Hospitality was a requirement of a decent Mauritanian and Bourdeau was prepared to indulge in a great deal of tea-drinking during the course of his business interactions. He had read much about the ritual. Each session would involve three cups of tea. The first would be bitter, given in the spirit of welcome, and the subject matter discussed while it was drunk should remain social and personal. The second cup of tea, known as the tea *de l'amour*, was served a little sweeter and while it was being drunk Bourdeau could lobby for government support and bring up matters that would underpin the success of his project. The third cup, the sweetest of all, would signal the meeting was at an end.

Bourdeau understood quickly that the key to the assignment's success was creating a good working relationship with the Ministry of Communications' chief of staff, a Moor who had the influence to open doors across the administration. It soon became clear that these meetings, expected to take place on an almost daily basis, were less motivated by the business agenda and almost exclusively devoted to relationship-building. There would be no quick deals and, while Bourdeau was conscious of the daily budget and tempted to push for a more assertive western-style approach, he knew he couldn't afford to risk alienation. With two less than successful assignments behind him, he had much at stake.

Several weeks on, his relationship with the chief of staff on a good footing and head office becoming more and more impatient for results, Bourdeau tried to push the agenda during the tea ritual, without success – the chief of staff remained firmly in control. Later, when a well-meaning colleague arrived in town and unknowingly caused offence by leaving a meeting early, Bourdeau felt he was losing the goodwill he had painstakingly built.

## **Gaining insight**

With hope of a successful conclusion diminishing, he was surprised to receive a phone call one Thursday afternoon, the end of the working week, to be told the chief of staff was driving over to pick up Bourdeau and his colleagues to take them for a weekend at his family's camp in the desert. The invitation was an honour and, with little time to plan, Bourdeau and his colleagues each filled a small backpack in preparation for three days of what they expected would be luxury camping with one of Mauritania's wealthiest

families.

As the chief of staff pulled up in his 4X4 outside their hotel they realised their expectations may have been a little off the mark. Faced with a long drive ahead of them, the men were expected to share the back seat of the vehicle with a large cow. The stench was overwhelming and as they drove into the sunset Bourdeau found himself pushing his face out of the window to breathe.

When they arrived at the camp around 2.00 am, the entire entourage roused to meet them. A sheep was presented with great ceremony and then its throat slit. As a feast was prepared in their honour the animal's tortured cries rang in Bourdeau's ears.

Sometime later, still feeling squeamish, Bourdeau, who did not eat red meat, found himself sitting on the ground around a meal of couscous, roasted lamb and intestines. He couldn't help noticing the sand mixing in with the couscous and sat helpless as his host moulded the food into a lump the size of a tennis ball before handing it to him and watching while he ate.

Nauseous and exhausted, Bourdeau was relieved when they were shown to their sleeping quarters, but found sleep was elusive as the red gleam of the camp dogs' eyes moved ever closer to his exposed mat.

### **Sheep's liver and camel milk**

The next morning, a closer inspection of the camp revealed piles of camel dung, sand-lice and children crawling through both. The only food available was leftovers from the sheep slaughtered the night before. Slivers of liver and a dish of warm camel's milk were presented to him for breakfast. As he attempted to hide the liver away, the chief of staff's voice rang out, "I see you, I see you – no, you must eat."

Over the next few days Bourdeau and his companions played with the children and chatted with the adults who stayed behind in the camp while the women fetched water from boreholes some distance away. There was no water for ablutions and the three staffers struggled in the blistering heat. Despite the discomfort, Bourdeau discovered that the older members of the family were well-informed, maintaining contact with the outside world via a battered transistor radio. Although their basic levels of French and English hampered conversation, he was impressed by their wisdom. He inspected

the tribesmen's guns and tried on traditional dress.

No business was discussed during the three-day sojourn but Bourdeau felt closer to the chief of staff. During the next scheduled meeting on their return to Nouakchott, after a shower and a good night's sleep, it seemed the feeling was mutual. Over the second cup of tea, the chief of staff began to introduce vital contacts and leverage his relationships with various government bureaus. Bourdeau was finally being granted the information he needed to ensure his assignment's success.

### **A lesson in authenticity**

The lesson of the story is not about sacrificing comfort to gain the trust of valuable colleagues. It is about the need to be sensitive to local courtesies and traditions and, above all, to be genuine and sincere in your actions. Eating lamb's liver and drinking camel's milk may not work for everyone, but for Bourdeau, the response to the situation was genuine which the Mauritanian official recognised.

Cross-cultural management is complex. Dealing with the unfamiliar may require executives to adjust their attitudes to fit the circumstances; familiar mechanisms for networking or settling disputes don't always work. And, while cultural stereotypes are often exaggerated or over-simplified, they can help provide some insight – only if they are accurate and only if we never forget that it is just the starting point to getting to know someone from a different culture. Bourdeau's guidebook, or “bible”, proved a useful tool to start helping him understand the depth and patience he needed to gain the trust of the very person who held the key to his assignment's success.

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