

South Korean Culture Meets American Values



Residents of Montgomery, Alabama, are taking a lot more interest in Korean culture these days. That's because the South Korean automobile giant Hyundai Motor Company is building its first American manufacturing plant in the area. Montgomery City Library has ordered more books and tapes on Korean culture and language. Auburn University is oversubscribed for its luncheons on Korean and business etiquette. Some residents are even taking classes to learn the difficult Korean language.

Hyundai is also helping people to learn about Korean values. Every American employee hired completes a 16-hour course in Korean culture. American executives at Hyundai have already been immersed in Korean and Hyundai values with a week-long trip to Ulsan, South Korea. The education includes eating Korean food, learning about Korean history, and touring Hyundai's main manufacturing operations in Ulsan (where almost half of the one million residents work for the Korean automaker).

Hyundai executives also say they are adjusting their practices in Ulsan to fit American culture. However, Hyundai's reflection of Korea's high power distance culture—which reveres hierarchy and power of executives—may be difficult to leave behind. Hyundai's swankiest office in Montgomery is reserved for Hyundai chairman Chung Mong-Koo when he occasionally visits. The company even flies over his exclusive limousine before his arrival. When a Korean-born Hyundai executive was asked if he had met Chairman Chung during one of his visits to Montgomery, he quickly replied: "He is too high. I could not personally speak with him. "

Jim Crate, foreign editor for Detroit-based Automotive News, says Montgomery residents will likely see Hyundai's practices clash with American values in a variety of ways. "It's a very Korean company," Crate says. "They will have to evolve in coming to America.

Companies can learn from this example, to clearly understand cross-cultures between two countries and/or regions and to closely work with local communities to bridge the Cultural Gap to establish and evolve there operations. That's why, American employees at Hyundai's new manufacturing facility in Montgomery, Alabama, are learning about Korean values, and why

South Korean Culture Meets American Values

Hyundai executives are adapting their Korean business practices to be more compatible with American culture.

Companies need to understand differences in cultural values to avoid unnecessary conflicts and misunderstandings between people from different countries. In this example clearly there is a need to assimilate the high-power distance culture observed by South Korean versus Low-Power Distance Culture observed by Americans.

"Sources: B. Clanton, "It's a Job to Fill 1,600 Jobs," *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 19, 2003, p. B8; B. Clanton, "At Home with Hyundai: Part 2—Culture Shock," *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 2, 2003; B. Clanton, "Execs Sop Up Korean Culture," *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 14, 2003 p. A1; B. Clanton, "Hyundai Plant Ignites Interest," *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 17, 2002; T. Kleffman, "Company Faces Culture Clash," *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 3, 2002.

Cite this as:

YouSigma. (2008). "South Korean Culture Meets American Values." From <http://www.yousigma.com>.