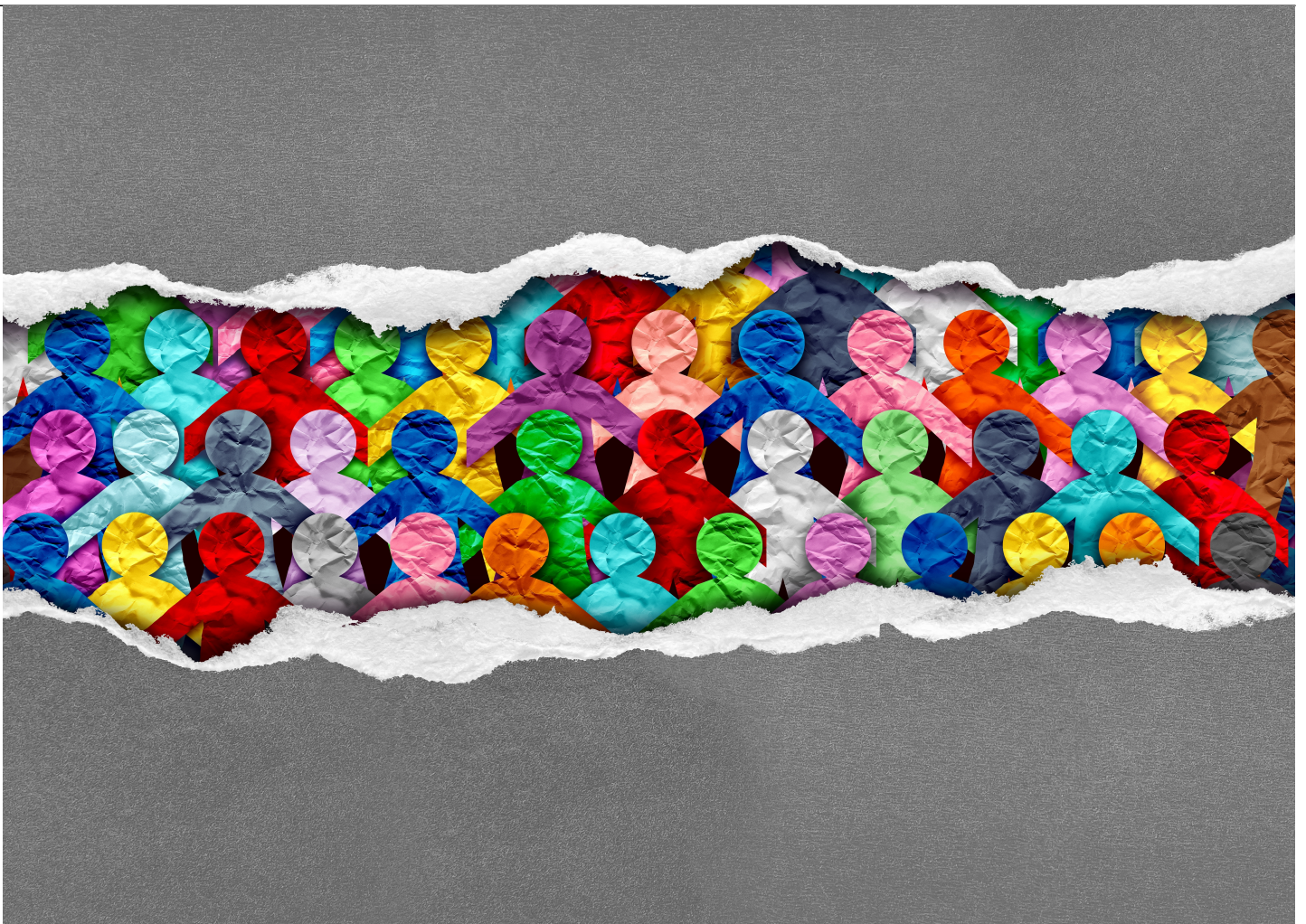




## **Navigating the Unwritten Rules of Business Etiquette Across Cultures**

**Cultural Competence**



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For in-house counsel working across borders, business etiquette is not just a matter of courtesy — it can shape trust, negotiations, and long-term business outcomes. Understanding how relationships are built, how hierarchy is respected, how disagreement is communicated, and how hospitality is expressed can help legal professionals avoid missteps and strengthen cross-cultural collaboration.

That was the central message of a recent ACC panel discussion on business etiquette in a global economy. Panelists emphasized that while customs vary across jurisdictions, successful international business relationships often rest on universal foundations: curiosity, respect, adaptability, and a willingness to understand the unwritten rules that guide professional interactions.

On May 28, 2026, five ACC in-house counsel from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and the United Arab Emirates joined the discussion, moderated by the ACC Southern California Chapter. Together, they explored how increased globalization has elevated the importance of cultural awareness, professional courtesy, and ethical business conduct for lawyers advising organizations in an interconnected world.



**Nega Mirete,**  
Legal & Regulatory Affairs Director, [JTI](#)



**Lucy Otolo,**  
Senior Counsel, [Trade and Development Bank](#)



**Theresa Chikwendu,**  
Principal Consultant, Legal & M&A, [MTN Group](#)



**Felista**

**Kimanuka,**  
Company Secretary & GC, [Bank of Kigali](#)



**Rima**

**Hadid,**  
GC, [Emirates Investment Authority](#)



**Serra Aladag,** ACC Southern California Chapter Board Member, GC &

The idea for the series originated in 2024 when **Serra Aladag** — ACC Southern California Chapter Board Member, and *General Counsel and Chief Administrative Officer* at **Cardea Health** — proposed exploring business etiquette in an increasingly interconnected world. Having spent part of her childhood in Türkiye, where she attended school and gained early exposure to different cultural perspectives, and later establishing her legal career in California, Aladag developed a longstanding interest in how cultural awareness, civility, and relationship-building contribute to successful business outcomes. Inspired by the California State Bar’s increased focus on civility, Aladag launched the series to bring together in-house counsel from around the world to share perspectives on cross cultural business practices.

“While laws and contracts may be written, relationships are often built through unwritten rules,” Aladag noted in her opening remarks. “How we communicate, negotiate, greet one another, handle disagreements, build trust, and show respect can have a meaningful impact on business outcomes.”

[Watch the full webcast here.](#)

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## Building relationships before conducting business

One of the strongest themes throughout the discussion was the importance of establishing trust before focusing on transactions.

**Nega Mirete**, *Legal & Regulatory Affairs Director* at **JTI** in Ethiopia, emphasized that personal relationships are fundamental to business success in Ethiopia. Trust, he explained, often determines whether negotiations progress smoothly and whether business partnerships endure over time.

Similarly, **Lucy Otolu**, *Senior Counsel* at the **Trade and Development Bank**, noted that business meetings in Kenya rarely begin with immediate discussion of agenda items. Instead, conversations often start with informal exchanges about travel, health, family, or current events. These interactions help build rapport and establish a foundation of mutual respect.

The same principle applies in Nigeria according to **Theresa Chikwendu**, *Principal Consultant* at **Legal & M&A MTN Group** in Nigeria. Relationships, networking, and trusted introductions play a significant role in opening doors and facilitating business opportunities. Building credibility and personal trust can be just as important as presenting a strong business case.

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**Felista Kimanuka**, *Company Secretary and General Counsel* at **Bank of Kigali in Rwanda** shared a local expression that reflects this philosophy: “Let’s discuss after we’ve known each other.” The saying underscores the value placed on establishing relationships before engaging in substantive business discussions.

## **Respect and hierarchy remain important**

Across all five jurisdictions, respect emerged as a foundational business value.

Panelists highlighted the importance of acknowledging seniority, using professional titles appropriately, and understanding organizational structures before entering business discussions.

Otolo explained that in Kenya, it is customary to address individuals by titles such as Mr., Mrs., Dr., or other professional designations unless invited to use first names. Chikwendu noted similar expectations in Nigeria, where understanding hierarchy can help professionals navigate meetings better and identify key decision-makers.

For **Rima Hadid**, *General Counsel* at the **Emirates Investment Authority in United Arab Emirates**, preparation begins before the meeting itself. Understanding who will be in attendance, their roles, and their levels of seniority helps ensure interactions align with local expectations and demonstrates professionalism and respect.

While hierarchy remains important, several panelists observed that modern workplaces are increasingly embracing rules of mutual respect that extend across all levels of an organization.

## **Understanding different communication styles**

Communication styles varied across the jurisdictions represented, offering valuable lessons for lawyers engaged in international business.

Mirete explained that Ethiopian business culture often favors indirect communication, particularly when delivering difficult news or expressing disagreement. International professionals are therefore encouraged to pay close attention to context, body language, and subtle cues rather than relying solely on explicit statements.

Kimanuka noted that communication in Rwanda is similarly diplomatic. Rather than directly rejecting an idea, business professionals may offer alternative suggestions or indicate that a matter requires further consideration. Such approaches help preserve harmony while allowing concerns to be expressed respectfully.

Kenya follows a comparable pattern, according to Otolo, who described a preference for consensus-building and avoiding direct confrontation whenever possible.

Nigeria, however, presents a somewhat different dynamic. Chikwendu described Nigerians as

generally direct and expressive communicators who value clarity and candor. While discussions remain respectful, participants often leave meetings with a clear understanding of whether a proposal has been accepted, rejected, or requires further discussion.

In UAE communication tends to be polite, indirect, and diplomatic. Maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation is important, so messages may be conveyed subtly.

These differing approaches serve as a reminder that effective communication requires cultural awareness as much as language proficiency.

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## **Time, meetings, and managing expectations**

Attitudes toward punctuality and meeting management also revealed interesting distinctions among the panelists' jurisdictions.

Mirete acknowledged that Ethiopia has traditionally maintained a more flexible approach to meeting start times, although multinational organizations are increasingly encouraging stricter adherence to schedules. He noted that international visitors may encounter meetings that begin later than planned or extend beyond their scheduled duration.

Otolo observed similar tendencies in Kenya, where meetings may start a few minutes late but still place a strong emphasis on hospitality and relationship-building.

Chikwendu explained that while flexibility exists in Nigeria, expectations around punctuality are evolving. Increasingly, professionals are expected to communicate delays and demonstrate respect for others' time.

Rwanda, according to Kimanuka, has become particularly focused on punctuality and efficiency, with late arrivals often viewed negatively unless advance notice is provided.

The UAE, Hadid noted, generally places a premium on timeliness. Meetings are expected to start on schedule, and participants should communicate proactively if delays arise due to traffic or other circumstances.

Despite these differences, one commonality remained: Successful meetings are measured not simply by efficiency but also by the quality of relationships they help foster.

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## **Hospitality as a cornerstone of business culture**

Hospitality emerged as another universal theme across the discussion.

Among the most memorable examples was Ethiopia's traditional coffee ceremony. Mirete described the ceremony as far more than a social ritual. It is a meaningful expression of hospitality, openness, and relationship-building. Participating in the ceremony is often viewed as a sign of mutual respect and willingness to engage.

In Kenya, Otolo noted that tea and coffee are frequently served during meetings, while networking conversations often continue over refreshments after formal discussions conclude.

Hadid highlighted the UAE's strong tradition of hospitality, where guests are commonly welcomed with Arabic coffee, dates, and refreshments. Such gestures reflect broader cultural values centered on generosity, respect, and relationship-building.

Across all jurisdictions represented, hospitality serves as an important bridge between professional

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and personal connections.

## **Professional appearance and cultural awareness**

The panelists also discussed the role of professional appearance in business settings.

Formal business attire remains the standard across most industries and jurisdictions represented, particularly within legal, financial, and government sectors. Men are generally expected to wear suits, while women are encouraged to dress professionally and conservatively.

At the same time, panelists noted growing flexibility in workplace attire, particularly on Fridays, when smart-casual dress is becoming increasingly common.

Several speakers highlighted the growing acceptance of traditional clothing in professional settings. Chikwendu pointed to the increasing presence of Nigerian attire in corporate and government environments, while Hadid noted that visitors to the UAE should not be surprised to see Emirati men wearing kanduras and women wearing abayas (both traditional garments) alongside colleagues dressed in Western business attire.

## **Small cultural gestures can have a big impact**

Although English is widely used throughout the jurisdictions represented, panelists unanimously encouraged professionals to learn a few local phrases whenever possible.

Whether greeting colleagues in Amharic, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Arabic, or Nigerian Pidgin English, making the effort to engage with local language and culture demonstrates respect and often serves as an effective icebreaker.

These seemingly small gestures can help build trust, create goodwill, and strengthen professional relationships from the outset.

## **Cultural intelligence as a business advantage**

As the webinar concluded, Aladag reflected on a central lesson that resonated throughout the discussion: Successful international business relationships require more than legal expertise.

Successful meetings are measured not simply by efficiency but also by the quality of relationships they help foster.

The insights shared by the panelists demonstrated that cultural awareness, adaptability, and respect are essential tools for today's in-house counsel.

While business customs may differ from one country to another, the principles that underpin successful professional relationships are remarkably consistent. Trust, respect, curiosity, and a willingness to understand different perspectives remain universal foundations for effective cross-border collaboration.

For legal professionals operating in an increasingly global environment, understanding these

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unwritten rules may be every bit as important as learning the written ones.

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