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Meet Adam Balfour: Set goals to engage leadership

Adam Balfour, Vice President and General Counsel for Corporate Compliance and Latin America for Bridgestone Americas in Nashville, Tennessee, USA

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AT: You have what may be the most global life that I know. You were born in Scotland, went to school in the Netherlands, live in the United States (US), work for a Japanese company, and oversee Latin America. That's a lot of cultural experiences. I want to learn more about all the cultural knowledge that you have, especially as it applies to compliance. Let me start with at once a simple and complex question: For any compliance professional with a global remit, what's the most important thing to know?

AB: I have been extremely fortunate to experience a variety of different cultures, and hopefully I will get to experience more cultures in future years. I have learned two key lessons along the way on culture. First, we all see the world through a lens that reflects our biases and experiences. Having biases is not an inherently bad thing, but we do need to be aware that the lens through which we see the world, ourselves, and others is different to the lens that other people will have. Second, we tend to focus on the cultural differences (and there are many, and they can be important), but there are also so many similarities and things we all have in common (we all like to bond over food, enjoy music and sports, and care for our loved ones). Focusing too much on the differences can cause one to miss many of the similarities we share with people from different cultures.

AT: One of the things that I find interesting is that sometimes the differences are surprising. I remember a compliance officer from one global company observing that it's not the distant cultures that are always the most difficult to navigate. While Americans, Australians, Canadians, and Brits share a language, there are often huge cultural differences. What would you warn a US compliance officer about when approaching compliance issues in the United Kingdom (UK), for example?

AB: Assumptions, especially when dealing with other cultures that are similar in many regards or share the "same" language, can be damaging. There is the risk—as your question points out—that we are speaking the same language, but the meaning behind those words can be very different. I had an experience many years ago when I had been in the US for only a few years where I innocently asked an administrative assistant for an office item and realized, in a moment of horror when I saw the expression on her face, that my British way of asking for it was very rude and inappropriate for a US person (I was asking for an eraser, if that means anything to any Brits reading this). Whether the culture is similar or different, be careful about the words you use to try ensure that the impact of your words is the same as your intent.



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