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Soft Skill: Who Picks Up the Bill?

Posted by Nancy Callan on 21 June 2013 | 0 Comments

We often think of bargaining language as confined to situations like a [garage sale](#) or to the purchase of larger items like cars or homes. One of the most common negotiations most people will engage in at some point is who will pay the bill in a restaurant. Not only are there language and soft skills specific to this situation, many cultural assumptions are thrown into the mix. Countries, as well as the cultures within them, differ in their norms about who should pick up the tab and when. Learning the related idioms and other bargaining language but not cracking this cultural code and developing the soft skills to successfully navigate this interaction can lead to social awkwardness as exemplified in the story below.

Adapted from [Callan's Contemporary Jigsaws 2](#), I have changed the story from a jigsaw to a simple intermediate reading. Read what happens below when Bo tries to pay for lunch.

The Invitation

James and Ken were long time coworkers. They often went out for fairly standard fare at a local restaurant for lunch. This time they decided to ask their new coworker Bo to join them. Bo was a new immigrant. Being a newcomer in the workplace, he was happy to be invited along.

Bo asked them if they had ever tried food from his home country. The men admitted they never had. Bo suggested they go to a restaurant where he could introduce them to some specialties from his native cuisine. James and Ken thought it sounded intriguing, so they agreed. Bo chose the most traditional dishes and both men thought they were delicious. Bo was happy the lunch had been such a success.

When the bill came, Bo reached for it immediately and said, "I'll get this." James smiled warmly and said, "Oh, no, let's just go dutch." Bo answered, "Don't worry about it. It's my treat." Ken said awkwardly, "If anyone should pay, it's us. We are the ones who invited you." Bo quickly replied, "No, really, I insist. It's on me." James and Ken thanked Bo politely, but felt very uncomfortable. Bo was surprised that James and Ken let him pay so easily.

To get your own copy of this story with the questions that follow, for use in your own classroom, click [here](#).

Bo had different cultural norms around paying the bill. In some countries, such as Australia or Guatemala, it is customary for diners to split the bill evenly. In others, such as Switzerland or Canada, diners pay only for what they have eaten.

In perhaps most countries of the world, one person offers to pay. I've created a chart to list some of these differences below. (Please let me know if there is anything I have missed or gotten wrong.) Click on the chart to view it large on your computer and download it if you want.

Traditional Cross Cultural Differences in Who Pays the Bill

*note that these traditions are changing with the younger generation and that more than one custom may apply per culture. Please inform me of any corrections needed.

Inviter Pays	You Pay For Your Own Food	Split the Bill Evenly	The Older or Richer Person Pays	Guest of Honour Pays	One Person Offers to Pay- You Should Argue	One Person Offers to Pay- Do NOT Argue
Egypt	Canada & USA	Australia	Afghanistan	Iran	China	Israel
Germany	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	China	Italy	Ireland	Middle East
Greece	Egypt	Guatemala	India	Philippines	Korea	Russia
Italy	Germany (but not separate bills)	Italy	Iran		Lebanon	Thailand
Latin America	Italy	Scotland (casual)	Italy		Philippines	Turkey
Spain	New Zealand	Spain (some areas)	Korea			Vietnam
Philippines	Scandinavia					
Thailand	South Africa					
Vietnam	Switzerland					

~courtesy of www.ESLjigsaws.com~

Finding out it is the norm for one person to pay is not where it ends, though. It's unfortunately more complicated than that! Even in cultures where it is customary for diners to go dutch, one person might still offer to pay. How should you respond? In some cultures, such as in Vietnam or Iran, when your companion offers to pay, you should not argue and simply accept politely. In others, such as in China or Korea, you should argue and insist you will pay.

How many times should you offer to pay? In North America, just as with offering second helpings of food, it's customary to offer once, follow up with an "Are you sure?" and then drop it. In other cultures, this might leave a bad impression, as if you made no real effort to pay. If you followed this North American custom with

Chinese hosts, they might wonder why you didn't try to shove the money in their pocket or say you were going to the washroom and discretely pay the server.

So, how can you acquire the soft skills to successfully navigate these cultural differences without causing offense? Do you have to memorize the chart above? How do you think the scenario with Bo would have played out if James and Ken had simply shared that when they go out for lunch with coworkers, they always "go dutch" and asked Bo about his customs? What might have happened if Bo, as the newcomer, had said something like, "I'm happy to pay if we are taking turns. What's customary for you two?"

Perhaps the best soft skill to acquire is the habit of sharing openly about your traditions and politely offering others the opportunity to share about theirs.

For **teachers of beginner levels** who wish they could find something on this topic for their own level, consider taking a look at [Callan's Contemporary Jigsaws 1](#). The same story exists at a lower level in jigsaw format. For **teachers of intermediate levels**, the same story exists in a shorter jigsaw format in [Callan's Contemporary Jigsaws 2](#). Both books have a listening cloze that accompanies the story.