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Dear Reader,

How do you deal professionally with those who are different from you? What adjustments do you make when you work across linguistic, ethnic and national boundaries?

Development programs which involve working and understanding across cultures, place obligations on both consultants and participants, and provide possibilities for exciting learning for both. The greater responsibility for success lies with the consultants, and they have to find their own ways to cross the boundaries that exist. This task has its own rewards, not the least of which is becoming aware of one's own culture, one's own values. It is a wonderful opportunity to become aware – not of how differently others think, but how different *we* are ourselves. We often gain deeper insight into our own culture when working in, and being obliged to communicate clearly in, a foreign land.

Plunge into this article that explores the exciting adventure of crossing boundaries.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

*"There never was in the world two opinions alike, no more than two hairs or two grains; the most universal quality is diversity"*

*Michel Eyquem, seigneur de Montaigne (French essayist, 1533-1592)*

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# LIM NEWS



*We develop your leaders while they develop your business*

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# BOUNDARY CROSSINGS

By Tony Pearson

There can't be many occupations more exciting than one that involves working across national cultures. It can be extremely complex, of course, and demands that the consultant prepare himself/herself with guidelines that attempt to make it less complex.

As the world becomes smaller — and flatter as Thomas Friedman\* posits in his provocative book "The world is flat" — the challenges to consulting organizations involved in this time of globalization are centered on heightened sensitivity towards national differences in perception, politics, history, religion, values and belief systems. Cross-cultural waters can be treacherous, and this article is a short, anecdotal look at some challenges met, and learnings gained, and tips I have found useful in navigating those waters.

## ► Get a "guide" from the culture.

When working in a national culture that is new to me, I usually try to obtain the help of a guide from someone outside the organization but inside the national culture. No matter how often we have vacationed in a country, we are unlikely to be more than superficially acquainted with deeply held beliefs or practices. I recall a helpful lesson I learned through such a person.

We were working with middle management of a Dutch dredging organization, mainly engineers used to tough assignments in hard work environments. We introduced them to a less directive "coaching" approach to giving feedback, and found that this preferred, appreciative way of giving feedback met with the amused observation that "This typically American feedback is too nice". One team in particular seemed impervious to any positive reinforcement on what they were doing well. Wanting to introduce the leadership candidates to new ways of leading, we persisted. Fortunately the Dutch consultant we were working with provided us insight. He asked me who the team members were, and then suggested that with two of the team members from Limburg in the south of Holland we should use the appreciate form, but with the remaining four others, from the west, we should offer tough assessments, citing only behaviors they should change, and not even mention what they did well. My skeptical reaction was "Hans, Holland is a small country; surely there can't be big regional differences."

I did as he suggested and the result was excellent. The four 'westerners', who had given me adequate opportunity for critical feedback, were absolutely delighted to get it, and one said, "That's great. You really kicked us in the backside". They changed their attitude towards the workshop, and the 'southerners' responded to the appreciative form of feedback. You never stop learning in this work.

## ► But, you don't always have to accept the guide's suggestions!

Guides can be as much prisoners of their own national culture as we coaches are of ours, and they can, if we are not careful lead us away from demonstrating new techniques and tools.

We were facilitating a weeklong leadership program in Singapore a few years ago, with the participants working in ad hoc teams to solve organizational challenges. One exercise we use to generate closer relationships between team members, called MyStory, centers on each team member

responding to a set of questions designed to show a new side of him/herself. Even though the questions do not touch on deeply personal revelations at all, our internal HR guide was highly skeptical about this, saying that ethnic Chinese were very reluctant to divulge such data, and tried to dissuade us from using it. We replied that there were also ethnic Malays there too, and we got him to agree to try it.

The resulting session astonished the participants. One woman said that she had worked for 15 years with a male member and had never heard him mention his family. Upon hearing that the man's grandfather had died a year ago, she offered her condolences, which deeply affected the man who expressed his happiness that he had had this experience. The team dynamics improved markedly afterwards, which was reflected in the quality of their work. This speaks to one of the basic tenets of Action Reflection Learning that holds that learning is often heightened when learners are put into unfamiliar situations and they have to adopt new ways of seeing, understanding and behaving.

Sometimes interventions cross cultures easily: sometimes we are more alike than different.

► **We are often given power just because we are "different".**

In the last example, the internal guide was persuaded to let us try something that he "knew" would not work. We find this happens quite frequently, and that can be useful to the client because they open themselves to new ideas and behaviors. Knowing when to push back gently is a key skill to learn.

We find, sometimes, that we are given credit — when perhaps none is warranted! — and we assume that it is a result of the USA's perceived success in business and in leadership development. (The same is, I believe, true of consultants from other Western countries too.) This first occurred, for us, in Latin America where our suggestions were often accepted readily because we are based in the USA, and so we call it "the gringo factor". It is a form of credibility that can be helpful in gaining entrée into organizations, and can get managers to try new ways of thinking and behaving. It is just as important for us to realize that the acceptance carries responsibilities with it, and we have to be careful not to give the impression that we have "the answer".

► **And always remember you are a guest.**

Whatever credibility we have will, I believe, only come if it demonstrates respect for the national culture of the programs' participants. One of our clients has been the United Nations Development Programme (UNPD) which focuses on managing aid to some 135 developing nations. Some particularly exciting work we did with that organization consisted of a series of seven programs for the newly formed role of Learning Managers, whose job it was to develop programs that devoted 5% of each employee's work time to learning. (Are you listening, Corporate America? Five percent!)

Each session involved about 25 representatives from differing countries, in itself an eye-opening experience for us. We believed it was essential to show respect for the individuals concerned and so, in preparation for each session, we spent time learning just the basic facts of each country's history, language and capital city. One can argue that this is just superficial knowledge but it speaks to what I believe is the larger issue of respect that we owe our clients. If just one person feels respected by our knowing that Tagalog is the main language of the Philippines, or that Thimpu is Bhutan's capital, then that is worth the effort. And it might make a small change in perceptions of the USA.

### ► Beware of shorthand.

What is "Europe"? "Latin America"? "Asia"? "Africa"?

There is real danger in applying shorthand to geography or to national characteristics. What does one understand when one works with a "European team"? Where does Europe start? Is England part of it? Where is its easternmost boundary? And how does one prepare for working in "Latin America"? What does Costa Rica have in common with Chile?

There is real danger, even among the Europeans themselves, in assuming that they know each other well. One of our clients in Europe has an executive team composed of eight people — but from six different countries — and in working with the team it is essential to pay attention to the differences in values and perceptions, and how they can cause misunderstanding and prejudice. Insightful Europeans acknowledge that they are a union of greatly differing peoples, and are usually open to examining how to cooperate better. And behind the joking references to culture, there are sometimes deeply held prejudices. (Such as eating habits! When working in Barcelona with one client, I had to negotiate with the Spanish kitchen staff to serve dinner at 7:00, mainly because the majority of the participants were from the Netherlands where dinner is at 6:00. I succeeded in the negotiation — but the client had to pay overtime because the staff had to come in early!)

### ► Pay attention to your language.

Development programs for multinational organizations are very often conducted in English, which has become the lingua franca for these organizations. Consultants who are native English speakers have the obligation to avoid making references to events and idiomatic jargon that will confuse even those managers who speak excellent English. North Americans must avoid baseball jargon such as "that idea is out of left field" or "step up to the plate". If you want to use sports references, learn some football terms! (The world game — not American football.)

And slow down your delivery. You are using what might be the third language of the participants in the program.

This is a very brief set of tips I have found helpful. What has helped you as you work across national boundaries?



\* Thomas L. Friedman, *The world is flat* by (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005)



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