

# **NO NONSENSE ADVICE**

**9**

**WORKING ACROSS CULTURES**

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# PROLOGUE:

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“We may have different religions, different languages, different colored skin, but we all belong to one human race” – Kofi Annan.

As organisations rely on a geographically dispersed workforce, as they strategically focus on building teams that offer both expertise and efficiency, their business success continues to involve bringing together people from diverse cultures across the globe.

Being culturally aware and having the ability to work effectively across various cultures is a key factor and a key competency. A lack of cultural awareness will always lead to misunderstandings and tensions in the workplace, which in turn will impact the organisation’s overall performance.

Be it a simple team meeting, a negotiation or an overseas assignment, the cultural challenges are real. Organisations and individuals must work to raise the cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity towards the cultural differences and issues that impact the workplace, allowing you to communicate more effectively across cultures. The risk of failure to address cross-cultural differences will cost organisations on the long run. Costly consequences or Creative innovations: many organisations have experienced the benefits of creating the cross-cultural awareness and the failure to do so.

How do multicultural virtual teams work? How does one manage such diversity? How can we communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds? So how can you better manage your culturally diverse team for peak performance?

This book provides some guidance in overcoming and leveraging both the differences and the similarities with all stakeholders. The areas covered are aimed at developing your cultural intelligence and improving your intercultural competency.

“Every man’s ability may be strengthened or increased by culture”  
- John Abbot.

“Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace: respect for diversity.” - John Hume.

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# Chapter 1

## Remember: irrespective of culture people are people

Sometimes, the issue with working across cultures is an over emphasis on the differences and not appreciating one fundamental principle: people are people: no matter where they are: and no matter what they do... Yes, certainly we need to acknowledge the differences - which we will understand in detail later: but, NEVER start on the premise that people are different: start with the premise they are all, you included, are human beings... The basic rules of engagement, and the basic guidelines for ANY human interaction is certainly applicable when working across cultures.

ALL human beings expect decency, respect and goodwill: these are universal themes. Yes, granted that how these manifest in different cultures can certainly be different: but, always, always, start any cross cultural interaction and relationship with the willingness to see people as people - and then build on from there. Try and have an open mind, open heart and a clean slate.

### **Work with the end in mind - after all, you HAVE to work with them don't you?**

You are working across a culture because you HAVE to isn't it? Even if you are merely a visitor to a different country, and being a tourist, the 'trip' will only be memorable if you have fond memories: rather than a series of unpleasant interactions... When conducting business, you are in a foreign country to either collaborate or to expand, so understand that YOU wanted this: and have taken the CONSCIOUS decision to work with a different culture.

Always work with the end in mind: remember unless you make this work and work well: chances are your objectives will not be met.

## **Dignity and Respect**

When working across cultures it becomes fundamentally important to do so with respect towards all cultures - rather than a superiority complex over yours. The moment someone feels that we have a certain 'complex' over our own culture, it becomes intuitive to become defensive about their own - we would do the same if the roles were reversed. Someone from our own 'culture' pointing a finger and being sarcastic or critical about our own culture is often accepted: but when someone 'outside' our culture makes the exact same point it is often greeted with hostility.

So, never start a cross cultural interaction without being absolutely respectful of their culture - no matter how alien their ways may be to you...

## **Clear your bias's**

We ALL have biases. They are specially pronounced when working across cultures. Germans are like this : British are like this : Sri Lankans are like this : Indians are like this : we generally have a preconceived notion about how an entire population will behave, based purely on here-say or what we have observed in movies - or based on our interactions with ONE or FEW from that particular country.

NEVER make that mistake. Understand that no one population is homogenous.

## **There are 'bad' people everywhere**

We also have the habit of seeing someone we know/we like/we consider 'ours' doing something and accepting it: but criticizing the same action being done by someone else we consider an 'outsider' - and worst of all, finding excuses and reasons for this as well - and justifying it...

Remember - there are the so called 'bad people' everywhere - in every country. NEVER assume EVERYONE in a country is like that. On a balance of probability, chances are you are bound to meet a few 'rotten eggs' if you are a constant traveler to a particular country or region - don't paint everyone black because of it...

Take this mental block out - because without an open mind you will never quite appreciate and get to know a culture...

### **You learn a culture**

Remember - we ALL learn a culture. Where we are born is not a choice: and assimilating cultural paradigms therefore is not a choice either...

However, given we are adults now, we have the choice of thinking through some of the cultural paradigms we have knowingly or unknowingly ingrained in ourselves.

When working across cultures being AWARE of these paradigms make a huge difference. We ALL have certain aspects of our culture that we guard: aspects of our culture we consider sacrosanct: be patient and understanding of someone else having the same sanctity to aspects of THEIR culture. To work together you must be able to understand before you are understood.

So, appreciate the fact that we ALL learn our respective cultures: and at times, we need to UNLEARN some of these paradigms if we are to have a truly meaningful interaction cross culturally!

### **Culture is only ONE of the determinants of behavior**

Fortunately, culture is only ONE of the determinants of our behavior. Remember that we have our personality determinants too. There are also situation-based behaviors. So, over relying on how people will behave based on cultural paradigms is a huge mistake. EVEN in a culture you will find enough and more 'subcultures' - and also, completely contrasting behaviors to the norms you assumed.

Once again, make sure you treat each person as a person, and understand how he/she 'works' rather than taking the overly simplistic route of assuming all people within a culture will work in a certain way...

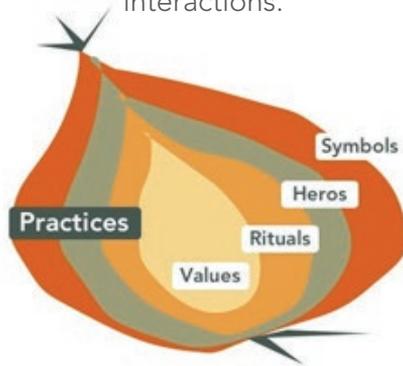
## Chapter 2

**However, understand that there  
ARE differences too - and you are  
wise to pay heed**

Having said 'people are people' - it IS important to understand cultural sensitivities. How 'acceptable' certain behaviors are is never universal. How people interpret things becomes colored based on a culture - and it is absolutely disastrous to start any business relationship on the 'wrong footing' - which is often cultural if you are unaware of it.

Culture DOES play a big role in our lives: and we ALL are governed by our cultures to a certain extent. For most of us, the biases based on culture are not even 'conscious' - so, assuming the 'other party' is equally 'unconscious' of their biases is a good assumption to have.

Take the onus of understanding cultural differences - so that you can proactively make more meaningful and respectful cross-cultural interactions.



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## Cultures differ based on a few core fundamentals

A broad appreciation for how national cultures differ can be found through two key authors:

- Fons Trompenaas identified 7 key dimensions of a national culture: (click here to read about the dimensions and strategies you can adopt when working across these dimensions : <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/seven-dimensions.htm> )

**A.** Universalism versus particularism

**B.** Individualism versus communitarianism

**C.** Specific versus diffuse

**D.** Neutral versus emotional

**E.** Achievement versus ascription

**F.** Sequential time versus synchronous time

**G.** Internal direction versus outer direction

- Geert Hofstede identified 6 dimensions: (click here to read about the dimensions and strategies you can adopt when working across them : [https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR\\_66.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_66.htm) )

**A.** Power Distance Index (high versus low)

**B.** Individualism Versus Collectivism

**C.** Masculinity Versus Femininity

**D.** Uncertainty Avoidance Index (high versus low)

**E.** Long- Versus Short-Term Orientation

**F.** Indulgence Versus Restraint

The two authors have much in common: read up and understand how cultures fundamentally differ: and there are some good insights on how each country stack up in relation to these dimensions too. For example: if you want to find out what Sri Lankan National Culture is like based on Hofstede's dimensions: click on

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/sri-lanka/> and you can read a detailed descriptor. Similar descriptors are available for most countries...

## **We all assume our culture is superior**

Remember: we ALL are comfortable with our own cultural paradigms and generally are made to feel that the polar opposite is 'bad.' Be conscious of this when working across cultures...

For example, those of us coming from cultures which are more risk averse celebrate 'caution' where those coming from risk taking cultures celebrate 'abandoning caution and just doing it.' An air of superiority is taken - and we tend to look down on others who are 'not like that.'

This is the biggest hurdle to cross when working across cultures. So, NEVER look at the polar opposite of your cultural paradigm as 'bad' - rather, look at it as 'different' and it will make a world of a difference when working across cultures.

## **Disrespecting a culture is generally taken far more seriously than disrespecting a person**

NEVER say or do anything that comes across as insulting when working across cultures. Disrespecting a culture is taken far more personally and seriously than one generally assumes: and it is generally something that disturbs people at their very core. Being respectful and understanding of a cultural paradigm is important - and working through the difference is an acquired skill.

## **Get ground info BEFORE you go to a new country**

Do some groundwork. Read. Talk to people who have worked in the country you are about to visit/work in. Learn the subtle nuances

- Learn the major minefields to avoid at all costs
- Learn how to demonstrate respect within the said culture
  - Understand the quickest ways to win over friends
- Ask what type of gifts are acceptable - and which are not
  - Learn religious sensitivities attached to culture

## **Always have a 'confidant' or 'help' with you during your first few interactions**

Initially, it is wise to have a 'friend' with you. This can be your translator: or a colleague. Having someone who has in-depth appreciation for the local customs, norms and culture, truly will help you not make unnecessary 'silly' mistakes. Recommend even hiring services of someone if the business is important enough for you...

## **Chapter 3**

# **Establish trust first**

Establishing TRUST is the first prerogative in working with different cultures (as it is with working with anyone actually).

So, go out of your way to earn and build trust. Assuming you have their trust is a big mistake. Similarly, assuming they are untrustworthy and therefore you need to always 'guard yourself' is also a mistake. Be open minded - and be vigilant at the same time - not to ensure you are not 'screwed' but to ensure you don't unconsciously leave room for them to mistrust you.

Remember trust always works both ways: but, be the one to take the onus to build trust and initiate it: it will always pay rich dividends later.

### **Always go 'bearing gifts'**

This is NOT a bribe. Take a gift that is demonstrative of your culture: and, something the recipient will actually value. Something homemade always works better: if you can possibly do this. Something rare in that country can also work well.

- Buying Tea - given we Sri Lankans are famous for tea?: Try taking tea straight off a factory - pack it yourself and have a small story about the factory you bought it from – much better than buying it from the airport!
- The person you are meeting has a sweet tooth? Why not make some homemade 'milk toffees' or 'dodol' or an authentic sweet meat?
  - Your Client is an avid reader: Why not take a book from a local author?
- Your point person has kids? They love to play board games? Why not make a 'pancha' board and take the pancha shells and write how the game needs to be played (Pancha is a Sri Lankan folk game traditionally played during the Sinhala and Hindu New Year time)

Remember also to ensure your gifts are 'packaged' right. Whenever giving a gift, always ensure you take the time and effort to wrap it right!

### **Always accept an invitation for a dinner/meal**

It is customary in most cultures to take your guest for a meal.

No matter how busy your trip might be, never turn down a dinner invitation. Graciously accept - but if you have certain food allergies, or certain foods cannot be consumed because of your religious or cultural beliefs, talk to your point person PRIVATELY about it. NEVER speak of these in public - it may insult the wider group, and paint you in a negative light (quite unnecessarily).

### **Always give a favor if you possibly can**

They ask for a favor? Try and oblige... Seek permission from your superiors if required - but try and oblige.

Doing a favor is a goodwill gesture like nothing else: so, if the opportunity arises, oblige and chances are you will win a friend for life...

### **NEVER make a wise ass crack at something just to raise a laugh**

Try and be conservative (not to be mistaken for being stuck up) initially. Humor is always appreciated - but what constitutes 'humor in bad taste' is highly culturally sensitive. Apart from the big NO-NOs like Gender, Religion and Politics, steer away from humor until you know a culture well enough. It is certainly very tempting to make a joke or two - or offer a witty repartee - but stay clear from this until you know your counterparts better - and also, have a deeper understanding of the new culture you are in

## Chapter 4

**Remember that words have different meanings in different cultures**

Since of late we have observed that most businesses now operate globally, on a global scale, and if they don't yet, it is what they aspire to. With the global marketplace becoming more accessible and the world growing closer owing to modern technology like the internet and email, Ben in England and Helga in Germany are only an email, phone call, skype or zoom meeting away and business is rolling.

Here is where our cultural sensitivity plays a vital role. When we communicate, we must be oh so aware of our language and enunciation! This does not mean to say we are expected to have perfect English like Ben, as we are non-native English speakers, meaning that for most of us, English is our second language, which means: we will not have the ideal accent or pronunciation. Here is a good representation of cross-cultural communication: A bit stereotypical, YES! but all in good humour!

What matters here is that we try and are open to learning. Our pronunciation and enunciation indeed are somethings we must work on. Either Sinhala or Tamil (if you are Sri Lankan) is our mother tongue, these languages are phonetic, spoken at a quick pace and often have more inflections naturally. When speaking in English we tend to carry over the pace and inflections which makes it harder for native speakers to understand us!

Also, since our mother tongues are phonetic, we tend to pronounce English words phonetically as well. Like: We-nes-day, eve-a-ning, Is-land, Reciep-tt, Al-mond, clo-thees Dengui, Women, Pizza". While this is excusable, we need to consciously improve, so we can improve our communications.

Additionally, it would serve us well to know that words are used differently in other cultures: for example if you were to ask for a 'garbage bag' in England they would be confused, you would have to ask for a 'rubbish bag' instead.

What's a Gift in England could men Poison in German! Of course, we are not born with the innate ability to know all! However, it would be to our advantage to at least research, be informed and be open to learning when dealing with diverse cultures specially if they are your business partners!

Written communication: when void of expression or lacking tone, could be interpreted differently, and not only something we encounter when dealing across cultures ONLY! How many times you may have had to re-read that text or email from a friend because you just could not decipher what was meant or the tone was off and you couldn't figure if they were annoyed or in a hurry? Usually written language could be the most misunderstood.

Also, with so many grammatical requirements sometimes meanings can be somewhat misconstrued!



Can we now add to this common office lingo and how it its interpreted by different cultures? For example, "Take necessary action ASAP" would translate to most of the working world as immediately, today or even now depending on sensitivity. For the Latin American Continent this could translate to maybe today or sometime this week. The best way to overcome situations like these is to arm yourself with knowledge of the culture and be as clear as you can when communication. Specially if things are time sensitive and you need a quick response, then do ask for it – politely, and make sure ALL your request are not urgent! In retrospect: us Sri Lankan's are natural born procrastinators,

we take Island chill to the next level and never attend to anything in advance and tend to put things off till the last minute – as a result, all our requests are URGENT and are irksome to others in the business world: so do be mindful!

So how do we communicate effectively?

- Know the culture before communicating
- Get the business dialect right before a call or communication, when in doubt clarify
  - Pay attention: where able to non-verbal queues
- Listen actively: and double check if your understanding is accurate
  - Avoid cross banter in mother tongue it's offensive

## Chapter 5

# Try and learn the language: at least a few words

One does not merely learn a language but the entire culture of the country, traditions and its origins in order to understand the gamut of context; before we can begin to properly blend in, because of the strong influence culture has over language. There are sometimes words or proper nouns in a language that cannot be and should not be translated, as it is so specific to that culture. Like “Thai-Pongal” – What we should do in this instance try our best, to pronounce the word as accurately as possible – with respect! Business relationships will flourish when you take the effort to converse in their language and do so genuinely.

### How would you learn a language?

Well there is always language classes available and with the internet these are now only a click away! There are online courses you can take if you have the discipline, time and money to invest. If you want to go it alone, here are some tips:

- Start out with greeting and frequently used words, check in YouTube how they are pronounced and weave them into the conversations.
- Research – like crazy and make a glossary of the most common words for directions, greeting and pleasantries...there are foreign language dictionaries or phone apps for this and could be an industrious way to kill travel time
  - Pick up whenever you can leaflets from the hotels, airports, and a map, the simple phrases and places on these will be useful.
- Commit to learning a new word a day, and use it in your conversations
- Have a notebook or word document where you have listed words you discover (Personally I have one for English words I discover with their meanings, and include them in whatever I write)
- Have a thesaurus handy, be it digital or physical to look up a new word or simply if you need to communicate something new.

## Usefull links

<https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/english-words-different-meanings/>

<https://www.translatemedia.com/translation-blog/culture-important-language-learning/>

<https://www.brighthubpm.com/monitoring-projects/85141-project-communication-tips-nonverbal-communication-in-different-cultures/>

<https://hbr.org/2004/10/cultural-intelligence>

<https://www.dailywritingtips.com/homograph-examples/>

## Chapter 6

**Try and draw comparisons and commonalities: explain how your culture is similar to theirs**

Cultures are learned and not inherited. We don't inevitably know all the values, beliefs, customs, etc. that the cultures we adopted. Much of what we acquire about a culture can be well-educated through school, family, peers. There are many situation and occasions we subconsciously learn about cultures. For example, we do celebrate different festivals which we learn in schools and families, like Christmas or Sinhala, Tamil new year is always on December 25th and on April respectively. However, the customs and what it means to be 'in the Christmas or new year spirit' is something which we don't have a conversation about on regular basis or read in a book. It comes from observing others and just being around people who celebrate Christmas & Sinhala, Tamil new year.

Why cultures difference exists? when we lack awareness of the cultures then where differences appear. For an example, we know both Indians & Pakistanis speak Hindi & Urdu, but it doesn't mean that they have similar cultures. When we conduct our business operations with different cultural background countries, it is really important to draw out the differences. While doing so it's important how well you understand the comparison and to do that following tips will be very much helpful.

- **Become more self-aware** – Difference in culture are not always outwardly visible, and sometimes they don't manifest physically at all. This is because the modern world has to a large extent tempered down heavy cultural influences. Nevertheless, we need to be mindful that there are the differences and these differences need to be respected. It would serve us well to make note mentally and apply as necessary as the opportunity presents.
- **Exploring cultures**, reading about other culture will help to understand the cultural awareness, but one should be careful on the content presented. Sometimes they may represent unnecessary labels. So, don't stick to one source and look out for different sources, ideally it would be better if you seek some information from the respective government sources that could be helpful.

- **Talk to someone.** It is always a good idea to get different viewpoints about the same culture from different people with different background. For example, when prior to visiting a country it would be better to talk to your colleagues on the other side and get to know the values and beliefs. If you traveling to middle eastern countries where the majority is expatriates, you should research not only you should the Arab culture, but you should also have an awareness about the expat culture as well. To get to know this you should talk to your colleagues who resides there.

- **Remember everyone is different.** Its worthwhile remembering that is everyone is unique, no matter from which cultural background they hail from, with different opinions, norms and ways of living. The quicker you believe and admit that everyone is different, the easier it to understand and accept the cultural differences. A very good example is 80's English TV series of "Mind your language". The more each nationality accepts each other who from different cultural back grounds the more the relationship strengthens.

We are very good at observing and talking about cultural differences. Making an effort to learn common understanding and utilize these as elements to build the relationship with a colleague can be a positive methodology in a cross-cultural environment. Following are some points to consider when drawing commonalities in cultures

- **In our working environment everyone has common goals.** Being rewarded, respected, building great relationships with their colleagues, high level of job satisfaction is some of the common goal every corporate entity would like to establish. These should be looked at as cultural similarities, not differences. For example, we work with our counterpart in another country, which our common goal & their goals sync's well, if not we would face losses.

- Being open minded is another similarity we can look at in a working environment. We are encouraged by our employers to look every situation, individually with an open mind. Try not to have preconceived labels in your mind by focusing on a person's ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or faith. Don't draw conclusions and expect someone to be different to you (they probably are, no two fingers are alike) but enter a relationship with an open mind instead. A good example of this is the movie "Intern", Where 70-year-old man was hired as an intern in an e-commerce clothing company. Other employees who were millennials judged him because of his age and his capability to work in that environment which they deemed was not suitable.
- Do not assume that because an individual is from a different country that they will act differently. There might be individuals who are from a native country with a similar culture who acts in differently. A study about work-related values published in the Harvard Business Review found that there were far greater differences within countries rather than between cultures. (<https://hbr.org/2016/05/research-the-biggest-culture-gaps-are-within-countries-not-between-them>). On the other hand, cultural similarities influence subjects like education, generations and occupation - not nationality. For example, locally even though most government schools follow the same syllabus, they have different cultural elements which are carried into corporate environments.
- Rice considered the main meal in the Asian region even though the way its cooked and consumed may differ. In Sri Lanka and India, we prefer our rice boiled with curry accompaniments: in China, Japan and Vietnam: they consume steamed rice. Indonesia and Malaysia: rice is more of a stir-fried preparation like "Nasi goreng". Yet don't we all eat rice? Even European who visit to Asian countries enjoy rice meals because and embrace the culture along with it. Similarly, we need to embrace other cultures in the work environment by acknowledging cultural similarities and discovering common ground; things like food, Celebrating different cultural festivals. These are some of the aspects where we draw our commonalities in corporate culture. Christmas, Ramadan, Eid, are some of the festivities draw similar cultural norms, even though you're from different country.

## Drawing Similarities in Culture

Wherever possible it is to our advantage to draw similarities in culture.

As technology draws the world in closer or so the 6 degrees of separation would have us believe, you can be six introductions away from any other person on the planet. This is great on a business front where possibilities would be limitless, and globalization completely takes over the atmosphere of business and corporate settings: Is it not in our best interest to adapt and blend in? Finding common ground then becomes imperative to make business liaisons work and so we must neutralize cultures and draw similarities to build new working cultures!

- **Building strong relationship** is an important aspect in business. Relationships in business are more significant to some cultures than others. Asian and Arab cultures are profoundly relationship-based, while British and American cultures are focused on more on the deals. Whichever culture you hail from, if there is a deal to take place between any two of the extremes then a happy medium must be arrived at. There a benefit to building strong relationships with colleagues and within your industry. Looking at the bigger picture, these relationships will eventually benefit your business.
- **Compassionate culture - Friendly & Helpful** - As the corporate world is growing outward and globally it becomes important to maintain a friendly and helpful culture within organizations. These are values after all that we grow up with. In the instance that you are traveling to another country on work or if a colleague were travelling in, either way, a friendly and helpful culture would ease the transition – this is where a robust organizational culture would come in to play!
- **Creating a rewarding culture** is one of the key elements, every organization working on. It is not only financial reward we are talking about; it is non-financial reward brings lot of motivation. We are observing many large corporates do investigate global giants like Apple and google to create similar rewarding culture.

- Corporate diversity & Inclusion encourages the acceptance of all employees, regardless of their background. Many organizations Offer diversity & inclusion training to all employees, so differences are acknowledged, rather considered as a challenge. For example, McDonalds who started to employ differently able person in early days, where now many cooperate understand the value having such people in the workforces. This will assist organization to strive forward to global markets.
- Existence of Sub-Culture. While every organization goes through the expansion and growth through cross country there will be sub-cultures created. These are “mini” cultures that are born based on departments, branches, function etc. Accepting the existence of the core and subculture will enable business to grow due to the similarities if it’s not counter intuitive to what the overall organization is trying to drive.

#### Useful links

<https://www.culturalorientations.com/Our-Approach/Six-Levels-of-Culture/55/>

<https://hbr.org/2016/05/research-the-biggest-culture-gaps-are-within-countries-not-between-them>

## Chapter 7

**NEVER** run down the local customs -  
try and understand them

Culture is made up of both behaviors and beliefs which are common to a group of people within a society. In most cases these are instilled from birth: and through culture, people often define themselves and they conform to that society's shared values and eventually contribute to that society.

Regardless of how we happen to be associated with someone from another culture, we as individuals need to be prepared to recognize not just the geographical culture but also when it comes to business, the organizational and generational culture as well, as these too play a major role.

Bunol in Spain hosts the biggest Tomato fight in the world in August. In Czech Republic, Whipping Monday during Easter is celebrated by whipping women with willow branches in a belief that ensures fertility and vitality...and men are rewarded by the women too. In Scotland brides are covered in all sort of disgusting things like, rotten eggs, milk, mud, etc., and the belief is that if the couple can withstand the humiliation of the ceremony, then they could possibly overcome any challenge in their lives.

Body language, or non-verbal communication, varies across different cultures. What may be considered foolish in the Scandinavian culture could be seen as a friendly welcoming gesture in parts of the African culture. A common gesture of calling someone over with your hand while the palm is facing up, in some countries, is considered very rude and impolite in certain countries in the Far East.

Therefore, running down a local custom will only prove to be detrimental to the purpose of our association/affiliation be it business or a holiday. Here are some key things to bear in mind:

If a custom is new or strange – try and widen your understanding

- History - Make it a point to learn the history behind that custom
- Significance - Understand the significance of that custom and why it continues to be practiced in modern day
- Reaction - Find out how you as an outsider is expected to behave/ react during the event/occasion

Always be mindful of your reactions

- Facial – it is always your biggest giveaway and possibly the hardest to control. Best way to counter this is to be open minded and neutral. Remember, unless it is a solemn occasion, you can't wrong with a pleasant smile!
- Body language – Analyze your neutral stance. Crossed hands over your chest may be comfortable it could possibly send out a wrong message. Watch people around you to gauge what may be accepted. While at our local 'Pirith', while everyone has their hands folded in prayer, we would not expect to see anyone (even a non-Buddhist) with arms folded across their chest or in their pockets!
- Comments – It may be hard to come up with the right words at a situation which you are not familiar with. Unless, it is a genuine question, that too phrased delicately, please avoid any form of comments as it may be perceived as rude or offensive. Stick with the general nod or acknowledgements for now. Have that conversation post the event, with the trusted 'culture translator'

## Be mindful when relating and narrating your experience

- With parties back home – Strongly recommend any post discussion of a cultural event/activity, during your personal time and away from public ears. This would avoid possible over-hearing of conversation which could be considered in bad taste. If you must relate it while in public vicinity, always narrate it in a manner that shows respect and consideration for that culture
- With your travel partner/s – While it may be tempting and fun to make comments to each other, our reactions could also be perceived as a sign of disrespect, if we are not careful
- Speaking in your own language – Even though you may be talking to your family or friends or colleagues, it is considered rude to speak in one's own language while in the company of those who are not familiar with the language. Even if you thought that a witty comment was made so that no one else would understand, and you may be just right in thinking so, people can still sense 'tone and expressions' and could lead to it being perceived as a sign of disrespect, even if you were actually on a completely different topic!

## Social Media

- Pics, Posts & Captions – Please make sure that it is culturally acceptable to share the custom in question. Some customs, no matter how interesting or intriguing, may not be appropriate for public sharing. Please ask before you post. Captions are great, please note the tone and ensure facts are stated accurately. A selfie taken with your back to a statue of Lord Buddha (no matter how majestic and beautiful it may appear) is considered disrespectful and in some cases may have legal repercussions
- Comments – Once your post is up and seen by all your friends and family, someone is bound to make a comment, that may be a little indelicate/ bad taste. Suggest that you respond in private and offline and if required delete the comment. You would have certainly made new friends in your travel and you don't want to be inconsiderate and disrespectful

## Attire

- Always ask what is appropriate to be worn for an event or activity or even locations. It would be great to have options in your suitcase and best to always find out from your 'culture-translator' (friend, guide or your trusted point of contact)
- In the absence of a source, it is always better to err on the side of conservative...unless of course it's the nude beach!

## Etiquettes of Food and Dining

- Food forms a part of any culture and the option of joining in is completely up to you: if you have a sensitive stomach you may want to sit this out, but for the more adventurous, remember there is a polite way of checking on the ingredients and its preparations. It would serve you well to know that while most foods are swallowed, some are chewed and spat out. Ask (never assume) or observe how to partake
- While at the table/eatery, etc., be it a fine dining, street vendor or at someone's residence, always remember that there are etiquettes one must follow. In some customs, we wait for the host to start, while in others, you start as soon as the first dish arrives. In some other customs, you wait for the base dish to arrive. In some instances, you may be required to use cutlery or chopsticks or even your hands. Learn these well in advance to avoid embarrassment and / or offending your host. It will serve you well to be prepared for the slurping and burping which is acceptable and complimentary in some cultures

## **Chapter 8**

# **Try and assimilate norms and paradigms**

While assimilation, which requires one to adapt to a different culture than one's own, is predominantly applicable for those migrating. However, assimilation is also important when our association of affiliation to another culture is more long term in nature.

Thus, assimilation is a process of mutual interchange or diffusion of culture through which persons and groups come to share a common culture. It is a process of decreasing differentiation and increasing unification among people.

Learning to fit into a working/living culture calls for more than just etiquettes and customs. It calls for an understanding of pace, communication patterns, as much as the organizational and generational culture. While there is strength in diversity, there is also acceptance in assimilation.

### **Contributing factors:**

You will not always have it your way....

Learn to accept it. Tolerance is important and your attitude matters. The sooner you do the better off you will be, besides if you don't accept it, how will you learn from it?

Always be open to new ideas and thoughts....

When you deal with different cultures, you will realize that they are used to doing things differently...certainly NOT the way you have been used to doing it...be open minded and be willing to give it a go...you will never know till you try...Always try it and work on improving it as you go along.

Be eager to learn about the other culture...

It is a blessing that many do not see or value....when you are fortunate to work with people from different cultures, always make it a point to learn about them...this is crucial as not only will it help you build good relationship but also place you in a better position to manage the situations.

## Learn the laws

Always know what the laws are as this will be a good guide as to what you can and cannot do and what you must do. Depending on your requirement, basics like opening a bank account, sending/receiving funds, driving in a foreign country, etc., will all play vital part in you assimilating a culture which you are now expected to be a part of.

## Pace and Hierarchy at work

Knowing the norm in a new culture will help you assimilate better for the overall benefit of the organisation. Depending on the location, the working environment could be extremely fast paced (Dubai, New York) or extremely relaxed (Fiji). Also, in some cultures, they are very open and modern in how they address their bosses by the first name. While in others it is considered rude if you don't use 'sir/madam' to address your boss or superiors.

## Communication

The absence of proper and open communication will almost certainly lead to isolation and this in turn will become a barrier to successfully assimilating the new culture. George Bernhard Shaw, the famous Irish playwright, said, "the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place". If we don't consciously ensure that that correct messages, both verbal and non-verbal, are sent out and received in the same manner, as intended, then we can safely assume we have failed!

# EPILOGUE

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People are different, especially when it comes to customs and traditions. It could even seem outright weird to some.

The purpose of assimilation is to decrease differences and to increase unification amongst individuals/groups. The onus is on you.

It reduces group conflict by blending differing groups into larger, culturally homogenous groups. Anything which binds people into a larger group will tend to reduce rivalry and conflict between them. A study by Sherif and Sherif (1953) shows that even though there are no real differences or issues to fight over, conflict still tends to develop wherever separate group identity is recognized. Assimilation removes some but not all possible pressures toward conflict.

The importance of assimilation rests primarily in its elimination of boundary lines as two groups, formerly distinct, assume a common identity. Boundaries help in developing 'in' and 'out' group feelings or the feeling of ethnocentrism (the attitude that one's own culture is superior to others, that one's own beliefs, values and behavior are more correct than others).

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Vidusha is currently the Destiny Architect at High5 Consultancy and Training and also the organization's founder member. His areas of expertise lies with strategy facilitation, HR strategy development and Leadership Training. He has conducted assignments in 15 countries regionally and consulted for the World Bank, the UN as well as some of the top corporates in Sri Lanka and the Region. He is also a member of the board of directors for Chrysalis, a social enterprise working to empower women and youth by fostering inclusive growth in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.



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