

Work beyond borders

Bridging the cultural divide

Resolving cultural differences will never happen by itself. Doing so requires sensitivity, awareness, and savviness. But to be globally competent, an increasing number of companies are taking this issue seriously. They are investing a large amount of time and money to enable staff to have a better understanding of how to bridge these differences in our understanding of normal business behaviour. This article focusses on the finer nuances of being able to communicate and work effectively across cultures, which has become increasingly significant in this increased age of globalisation.

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My first brush with the American culture was rather humiliating. I went to the US for my Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering after graduating from IIT, Mumbai. My advisor, Bob Altenkirch, had given me a lot of material to read for the upcoming NASA-sponsored combustion project. I was overwrought from being homesick and from not having found a permanent place to live in. After one of

the classes a couple of weeks later, Bob asked me if I had finished the reading assignment. I answered that I had not. He matter-of-factly asked, "How come"?

I was speechless. I had not expected such a blunt question and did not really know what to say. The incident served as a wake-up call to me. I mumbled some excuse, but quickly realised that the American culture — characterised by directness, results, and accountability —



was quite different from what I had been used to in India.

There's more to it than meets the eye

In this brave new world of global interdependence, we are all joined at the hip with the rest of the world. Over the past 15 years, India has emerged as a key player in the global economy — a major global consumer and an attractive destination for global investment. Trade between the US and India has continued to expand, reaching over \$ 50 billion last year, and the US has become India's largest trading partner.

People all over the world are starting to dress similarly, speak a common language, shop in the same places, enjoy the same movies, follow the same news, listen to the same music, eat similar foods, and even play the same video games live with kids from all over the world. This seeming worldly kinship we have developed, however, can be quite misleading! Outward appearances can be quite deceptive and can be mistaken for cultural similarity between two countries.

A lot of attention is paid to differences in observable customs and etiquettes related to how we eat, greet and meet. But there are many deeper differences. These are responsible for differences in how we communicate, relate, interact and work with people from different cultural backgrounds. If these differences are not understood and reconciled, they can very easily lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, irritation, name-calling, finger-pointing, strained and even failed relationships.

One size does not fit all

Now, it is not easy to pigeonhole an entire country of 300 million like the US, let alone a country of over a billion people like India. There is always a danger when we generalise anything across such

large populations. It is important to remember that when we generalise, the things we say are 'generally' true — not in every situation in case of each individual every time.

By generalising are we not stereotyping, and is that not unfair? Well, not quite. There are subtle differences between generalising and stereotyping. Danielle Walker and others in their book, *Doing Business Internationally* draw an excellent distinction between generalising versus stereotyping. Inherent in stereotyping is a closed, judgmental, and biased (positive or negative) attitude, whereas generalisations are rules of the thumb, based on open attitude subject to review, change and learning. Generalisation leaves the possibility open that the initial hypothesis may or may not apply to every individual. Generalisation also recognises that cultural boundaries are not the same as geographic, racial, or national boundaries.

Even in a single country, there are innumerable subcultures present. An individual's cultural profile is a complex composite of various factors including gender, education, age, language, profession, social class, religion, national origin, and experiences with friends, family, and neighbours. So painting everyone with the same broad brush would be a mistake.

How we interact with our environment

The US environment is achievement-oriented. It is focussed on the task at hand and it rewards getting things done. Americans tend to define themselves in terms of what they do for a living and their individual accomplishments. There is a sense of meritocracy and 'it is what you know and what you can do' that counts the most.

By contrast, the culture in India is relationship oriented. The focus is on building trust. People are rewarded for compatibility and for being



team players. Indians tend to define themselves in terms of the lineage, caste, family, and philosophical views. Their mantra is 'it is who you know' that matters the most. In this environment, more time is spent socialising, building relationships, and developing consensus.

You can probably see how a typical American can become frustrated with the looser structure, missing sense of urgency, and seeming waste of precious time in India. By contrast, the Indians would perceive Americans as aggressive, controlling, insensitive and impatient.

How we view time

Consistent with the prevailing control orientation, Americans tend to view time as money. Punctuality is highly valued and delays cause anxiety

and frustration. There is a feeling that time is a precious commodity not to be wasted. You are expected to speak to the point and not waste time by rambling on. It is not uncommon among Americans to interrupt and ask, "So, what's your point?" if you do meander. Americans are armed with their planning guides and "to do" lists ready to conquer time.

Indians by contrast recognise that time is important, but are not as uptight about it. Time is much more loosely defined and is seen as a means to an end — not an end unto itself. "It is clearly something to be managed, but there is no point in being so particular about it," say the Indians. Deadlines and appointment times are seen as general guidelines and not as rigid rules. There are other equally important things to worry about such as relationships and family commitments.

You can guess how a typical American can become frustrated with the seemingly cavalier attitude, unprofessional behaviour, delays, and missed deadlines. By contrast, he or she would be seen by Indians as rigid, irritable, impatient, and obsessed with time alone rather than overall balance.

How we express ourselves

Research shows that how something that is already said is often more important than what is being said. Americans, however, typically rely on the more direct, low-context way of communicating. And, that is why communication in the US is typically direct, explicit, and written. Americans believe in making direct eye contact and not beating around the bush. It is concise and to the point yet informal and on a first-name basis.

In India, communication is indirect, implicit and expressive. You have to pay attention to the many non-verbal clues to figure out what someone really means. In this high-context environment, what you see is not what you always get. There are many different ways of non-verbal communication including facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body language, touch, and personal space. Indian communication avoids direct eye contact, public conflict, and embarrassment. Saying 'no' directly or putting the other person on the spot is considered disrespectful.

Once again, you can only imagine the confused state of mind a typical American is likely to experience moving from an explicit to

implicit communication. The potential for misunderstanding is enormous. 'No' is rarely given as an answer and 'Yes' can mean yes, no, or maybe? Americans are likely to see the Indians as distrustful, evasive, and wishy-washy. The Indians are likely to view the Americans as taking things too literally, cold, and condescending.

How we view ourselves

Americans are brought up to believe that they are their own person. They need to be independent and self-reliant. 'All men are created equal' and that there is a similar application of rules for all. Nobody is above the law or deserving of special treatment. There is an equal opportunity for all. Each individual does what's best at and takes responsibility for him or herself. Individual contributions and accomplishments are prized and rewarded. Drive, motivation, and determination are taught, encouraged, and expected at a very young age through stories such as 'The Three Little Pigs' and 'The Little Engine That Could.' The moral behind these stories is that you can be whatever you want to be—if only you work hard.

By now, I am sure you know that this is not necessarily how India operates. Group and family interests supersede individual interests. There is strength in numbers and interdependence. You are expected to make personal sacrifices for others. Camaraderie and teamwork are paramount. At the same time, there is recognition that because of one's lineage, education, family ties, or position, some people can be more equal than others.

Stories in India are characterised by emphasis on being in harmony with the environment and praising the virtues of sacrifice, help, and truthfulness. Rules are not as rigid and treated as guidelines to be circumvented if one can.





Americans typically react to corruption anywhere with horror. The 'decision by committee' approach easily flusters them. They tend to see Indians as less than ethical, unreliable, and unwilling to take accountability for themselves. Indians on the other hand tend to view Americans as selfish, disloyal, and inconsiderate.

How we view relationships

Keeping with the view that all men are created equal, Americans believe that everyone has the same rights and responsibilities. This results in less hierarchical and less bureaucratic structures. Titles, status, and rank clearly matter, but not nearly as much. Others' opinions matter in a relationship and deferential or status-conscious behaviour is not tolerated very well.

In India, stratifications and classes — whether based on position, religion,

caste, and authority—are seen as necessary for proper functioning of the society. Going through formal channels to get things done is considered important. Educational achievements are highly valued and so are titles, degrees and age. Knowing your place in the overall scheme of things, behaving accordingly, and respecting the hierarchy are considered essential social etiquettes.

Americans can easily get frustrated with this seemingly submissive approach and constraints on clearly speaking the mind. They can have trouble grasping their status and role in a relationship and showing appropriate deference. They can see Indians as too formal, pretentious, and placing respect for authority higher than the job at hand. Indians, on the other hand, tend to view American behaviour as loud, disrespectful, and contradictory.

Recognising different shades of gray

Culture is a complex, dynamic, and often contradictory set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. In this increased age of globalisation, being able to communicate and work effectively across cultures has become increasingly important. Whether you are establishing new markets overseas, importing or exporting products or services, outsourcing processes, or participating on multi-cultural project teams, being able to bridge the cultural divide and being culturally competent has become a necessity.

With nearly 200 countries represented in the United Nations, it is impossible for any one human being to become an expert in world cultures. However, here are specific things we can do to become savvier:

Keep an open mind: Recognise that it is not good or bad; it is just different. Try to observe others with an open mind without evaluating or judging. Different is okay! This would be too boring a world if everyone were exactly the same as us.

Know yourself: As Lao Tse said, "He who knows others is learned. He who knows himself is wise." Everything we do is based on our own culture. Learn more about yourself by taking a cultural orientation assessment, but keep in mind that simply taking an assessment, attending cultural training, or spending a few months abroad cannot change your long-held beliefs and attitudes.

Broaden your horizons: You can choose not to fall into a rut. Do not become too comfortable with the same old ideas. Welcome an opportunity to see, eat, dress, or experience something different. In fact, go out of your way to seek an opportunity to learn about cultural, social, political, and economic norms different from your own.

There is so much to learn from each other and this learning can only be enhanced by our willingness to recognise and accept that different people look at the world through a different lens. In this flat world, it is important not to attach labels, but merely to understand, appreciate, and reconcile the differences among us all.

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