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Lost in Translation: You don't have to go far to find a foreign culture

Most people know when traveling abroad they'll be facing a foreign culture. Unfortunately, not *all* people know this, just *most*. Some people could be in Timbuktu yet they continue to behave exactly as they do at home and/or expect the locals to behave that way as well. Sometimes travelers even have the nerve to *complain* that the "locals" behave differently and "act funny." Some even go so far as to insult their host culture.

A client recently told us a story about someone who came home from Africa and posted on his Facebook page that he was glad to be back to civilization. How do you think his newly acquired "friends" in Africa felt when they read that?

We're not suggesting that dealing with cultural differences is easy. It isn't. It's a combination of mindset and skill. Overall, the mindset should be about respecting differences. Sometimes, this is not enough. Leaders for instance have to leverage those differences, not just respect and tolerate them.

We started by saying that we don't have to go far to find a *foreign* culture. If we define culture as "the way we do things around here," then every group has its own culture and they're all different from each other. So what makes us different from others?

First, as a colleague says in her best Lady Gaga impersonation: "I was born this way." We're talking about gender, age, skin color, sexual orientation, personality, etc. Someone born in the 50's thinks and operates differently than someone from the 90's. The environment which influenced their upbringing is completely different. Similarly, women think and act differently than men. In her article, "Women, Power and the Challenge of the Financial Crisis" the IMF President, Christine Lagarde quipped that if Lehman *Brothers* had been Lehman *Sisters*, the economic crisis clearly would have looked quite different.

Second, it's how we are seen and perceived by others due to the labels, biases, and prejudices

acquired over life. It's not what we are, but how we are perceived. An example is the way people from a different class or with a different accent are seen. Remember "My Fair Lady?" Before you say to yourself the movie is too old, remember it's a classic, not old, and there is a remake coming soon . . . but we digress. In the story, Eliza's "dreadful cockney accent" is seen by Professor Higgins as *proof* of his theory that this is what truly separates the classes rather than a person's looks or money. If you've seen the movie, you'll remember he treated her as an object rather than a person.

We have a friend who is an attorney. She speaks with a heavy U.S. southern accent and she's blond. She told us that opposing attorneys see her and immediately roll their eyes as she walks into the courtroom. They clearly minimize her intelligence and expertise due to their first impression of her. She usually ends up using their perception to her advantage and they never see it coming.

Finally, the third source of differences relates to the ones which come from our life experiences and the choices we have made, such as where we went to school, the education we had, the lifestyle we've chosen (getting married, having kids) among others. Lawyers see things differently from accountants and both see things differently from engineers, and so on.

Why do differences matter? Although it's important to follow the basics of handling difference (respect, manners, compliance with legislation and political correctness), imagine the dangers of "group think" and the lack of diversity of thought. When you make a proposal and everybody agrees, and the meeting is ending in 30 seconds, it's delusional to think your meeting was a success . . . actually we dare to say it was a disaster. Even identical twins don't think alike. People will always have different ideas but are they willing to voice them?

One of our clients says they're great at cloning people. They hire the same kind of person, and through H.R. processes such as coaching, promoting



and rewarding they ensure that the same “profile” makes it to the top. Obviously, this company is not taking full advantage of its team’s diversity. Diversity of thought, creativity and effective problem solving is only possible when people bring their uniqueness to the table, and leaders have an open mind to listen to different points of view and the skill to facilitate the discussion.

We would like to leave you with some relevant questions to reflect on: Are you leveraging the differences that exist in your team? What else can you do? What are the risks if everybody agrees on every issue?

To learn more about this topic, please check the video below: Seven deadly sins in a multicultural world, speech by Geert Hofstede, in 2011. Mr. Hofstede is a giant in the field of cultural research.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2V8kVwlp2U>

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