

Cultural Adjustment Map

If the relationship is strong, then the truth will be accepted.

BURMESE PROVERB

WHENEVER YOU ARE TRAVELING TO A NEW PLACE, a map is a good idea. The same is true when entering a new culture. The cultural adjustment map¹ in figure 8.1 was created by a group of people experienced in cross-cultural travel and adjustment.

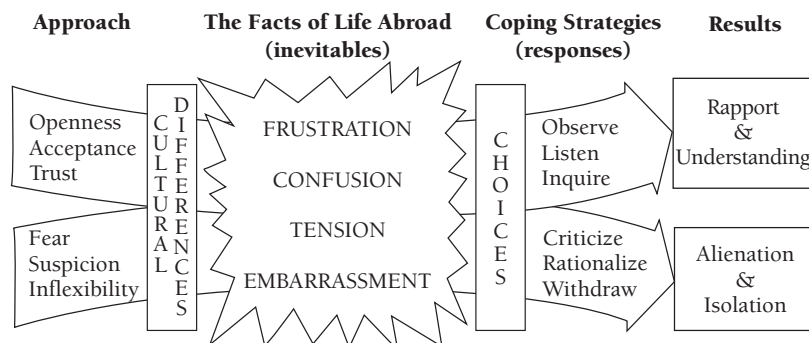


Figure 8.1. The Cultural Adjustment Map

For purposes of simplicity, let's look at the cultural adjustment map as having two tracks—the upper track, which begins with an approach of openness, acceptance and trust, and the lower track, beginning with an approach of fear, suspicion and inflexibility. Everyone tends to approach a new culture more on one track than the other, but no one travels one or the other exclusively. In fact, we will probably flip-flop

between the upper and lower tracks many times during our cross-cultural experience.

THE INEVITABLES

Note the section on the map called “The Facts of Life Abroad.” It suggests that everyone will experience some negative emotions like confusion and frustration as cultural differences are encountered. Many people tend to overlook these inevitables since they believe that God has called them and given them such a love for the local people that they will not experience any negative emotions. Usually they are in for a rude awakening.

Everyone who spends any time in direct contact with a new culture will experience these negative emotions in varying degrees of intensity and duration. It signals that you are very much alive and very human. Therefore

- having negative emotions does not signal Christian immaturity or lack of spirituality.
- falling victim to the negatives does not mean you are out of God’s will. Paul is clear that those who try to follow our Lord will have challenges and difficulties (2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 3:8-17).
 - it does not mean that you don’t have a long-term future in this culture.
 - it does not mean that you never should have come.
 - it does not mean you will be ineffective or should give up.
 - it does mean you are normal; so get on with learning the culture and practice the insights in this chapter.

THE UPPER TRACK

The person approaching a culture with more openness, acceptance and trust will still encounter cultural differences, feel the inevitables and need to make a critical choice. But the critical choice will more likely be to remain on the upper track and choose a positive coping strategy.

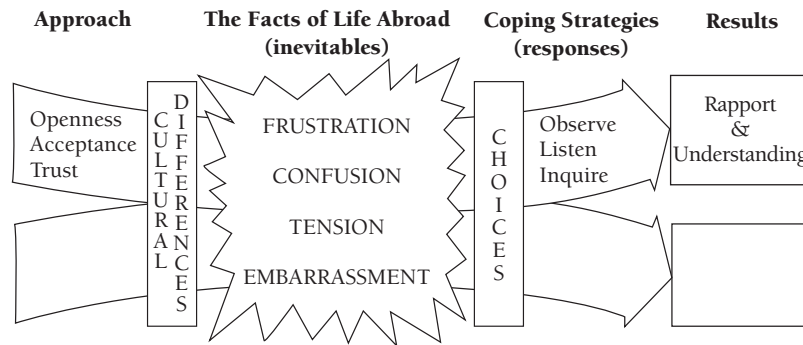


Figure 8.2. The Upper Track

Observe. Keeping your wits about you in spite of the negative emotions you may be feeling allows you to do something important: observe—look around and assess what is happening. In some cultures I get quite uncomfortable because the local people stand very close to me during conversation. I get the sense that they are pushy, overbearing and aggressive (note the negative attributions). I feel uneasy and a little anxious. I back up a step, they move closer again. I take another small step back, trying to get a little space between the other person's face and mine, but also hoping I will not offend them. *What is it with these people?* keeps racing through my mind while I try to stay positive and figure this out. Eventually, the conversation concludes, much to my relief. But now I need to understand. Over the next few days I observe how close people stand to each other when talking. It does not take long to realize that people stand close to each other in three kinds of circumstances: during moments of anger, during moments of debate or bargaining and during moments of friendship building. My experience fell into the latter category. Now I interpret the situation in the positive light that the other person actually intended—in fact, a Middle-Eastern proverb speaks of friendship as the “sharing of one another's breath.”

Listen. Listening is another important skill for coping with cultural differences. Focused listening should prompt more questions, which

should bring more listening, which provokes more questions and so on. Most people err in not listening well, even if they do ask some good questions. Often people listen only as a courtesy until they can speak. Think of listening as an act of loving. Perhaps nothing shows respect for others more clearly than listening to them and then probing their thoughts more deeply.

Inquire. Inquiry is simply the art of asking questions. A good dose of curiosity helps. All my life I have been curious as to why things work, why they happen and why people act the way they do. So I have made it a habit to ask lots of questions; a habit, as it turns out, that has served me well in other cultures. Keep in mind that there is a wrong way to ask questions. The wrong way to pose a question is to imply inferiority, judgment or deficiency. For example, “Why do you drive on the wrong side of the road?” suggesting driving on the right side is correct. Rather, one might say, “I would enjoy hearing about the history of why you drive on the left side of the road. It is different from my past, and I am wondering how we inherited these two ways.” In many countries you will learn that driving on the left side was inherited from their colonizers. The more you have built trust, the richer the dividends of your inquiry.

Failure to inquire can cause major problems. A United States government agency was building latrines (outdoor toilets) to improve the hygiene in a poor, largely Muslim community in Asia. When the project was completed, the foreigners were proud of the contribution they had made to the health of the local people. However, it was soon discovered that none of the local people were using the latrines. In fact, they were using them as storage sheds. Why? A couple questions revealed that all the latrines were facing Mecca, and no respectful Muslim would use the facility while facing their holy city. A brief inquiry before the project began could have saved the foreign agency this embarrassment.

The person who follows the upper track on the cultural adjustment map will delight in the results: understanding and rapport. Understanding means you are grasping how the cultural pieces fit together and make

sense. As you understand the local culture you will gain appreciation and respect for it. Rapport means that you sense a bond with the people and value the relationship. Of course, this does not happen all at once. The insights accrue over time, and there are plenty of bumps along the way.

Yet one of the great pleasures of life is to plunge into another culture, figure out how it works and find yourself enjoying it as the local people do. It does not mean rejection of your culture nor does it mean that you accept everything in the new culture. It does mean that you are learning to dance to the rhythm of the new culture and, having done so, find yourself much more effective in accomplishing your goals.

One needs to travel that upper track many times before sensing the rhythm of the culture. But each time one treks that upper track successfully, it builds stronger openness, acceptance and trust. A chapter has been dedicated to each of these three crucial concepts later. Next, we need to look at the lower track, a place I've visited more times than I like to admit.

THE LOWER TRACK

If you approach the new culture with large doses of fear, suspicion and inflexibility, then the cultural differences will not only produce increased frustration and confusion, but you are now likely to make negative attributions about this new culture. Much of this happens at the unconscious level, but the effect remains the same: you will still be faced with a choice about what to do when those feelings occur. But this time, instead of suspending judgment, you will jump to a negative conclusion about the new culture.

Fear. Think about the fears you might have as you approach cross-cultural ministry and list them below. It is very important to label them so that they do not unconsciously sabotage you later.

The fears that I can think of are

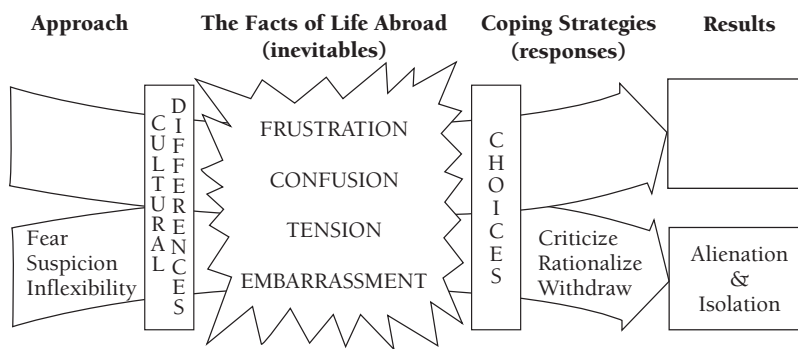


Figure 8.3. The Lower Track

Rank your fears from the greatest to the least. Being honest and realistic are necessary for successful adjustment.

Where did your greatest fear come from? Can you think of a number of sources for that fear? Maybe something happened in your past or maybe recent news from the country you are entering caused the fear. Maybe you even picked up the fear from someone else and made it your own.

Let's take one fear and work it through. Teaching at the university level most of my life, I have had lots of international students in my classes and I have enjoyed knowing many as friends. One thing many of them will admit after they get to know you is that they were scared when they came to the United States. "Scared?" I would exclaim, "Of what?" They would then sheepishly answer, "Scared of being murdered." I would often laugh because the thought was so absurd—not that it could not happen but that it was so unlikely. Yet it was the greatest fear of many. This fear emerged during the era when a city in the United States had the highest murder rate among the economically developed nations and had the reputation of being the murder capital of the world. Television carried the image around the world.

The same thing happened when my wife, our two sons and I lived in South Africa. There were places where violence, crime and murder were

very high. My family in the United States expressed fear for us and prayed daily for our protection. I assured them that we were quite safe. I cannot remember one time that I felt fear for my physical safety. In my extensive travels my wife and I have taken together and separately, we have rarely felt fear. Usually we are impressed by the courtesy and kindness of the local people. I think this will be your experience as well.

At the same time, I do not want you to think that you can just wander anywhere at any time and you will be fine. There are evil and malicious people everywhere in the world and one must always use good sense. There are places both in the United States and abroad that I would not visit at night. Seek and listen to the advice of the local people whom you trust. Err on the side of caution, especially if you are new in the culture.

Suspicion. This is the opposite of trust. It thinks the worst of others, or at least doubts the best. Sometimes you will have evidence to support suspicion, but take it in stride. For example, merchants discovering you are not a local person may raise their prices. You may feel they are taking advantage of you. In a sense, perhaps they are. Locals tend to think all Westerners are wealthy, and usually we are by comparison. While you may think that they are trying to take advantage of you, they think that Americans hoard their wealth. For example, if bargaining is a practice in the culture you enter, feel free to bargain, but usually you will not get the price the local people get. Yet, if you concentrate more on building the relationship and less on getting the best price, you will win in two ways: you will win friends and your friends will not try to take advantage of you. Furthermore, the resulting relationships can lead to meaningful sharing.

Inflexibility. This refers to the tendency to reject anything that does not look like you. It is the opposite of acceptance. Inflexibility, a form of rejection, is the square-headed person's refusal to change and adjust to local ways. Such a person has a strong sense of being right in most everything. This person has a narrow range of differences, believing what is right is what looks like me and what is wrong is what does not look like

me. Local people will probably sense superiority in such a person.

Superiority may surprise you. Most of us do not think of ourselves as superior. In fact, equality remains a high value in North America. Yet, many North Americans are still accused of an attitude of superiority. In part, I feel this is true especially for citizens of the United States who are accustomed to being told that we are a superpower, economically, militarily, technologically and in other ways. Some of this seeps into our thinking and we believe, not consciously or overtly, that we as a people and as a country are superior. Of course, there are many ways in which other countries are superior to the United States, but we rarely hear of it. If we do, we may not think it significant.

One U.S. corporation has humility as a corporate value. When their clients outside the United States were asked how these Americans demonstrated humility, their answer was, "They don't." Obviously many Americans are humble and demonstrate it, but maybe only other Americans recognize it because we define humility according to our cultural norms. Other cultures may define it differently and, therefore, demonstrate it differently.

Another reason for others perceiving superiority in many from the United States concerns natural cultural differences and how they are misinterpreted. Many Americans are outspoken, task oriented, goal driven, decisive and assertive. Many believe these qualities made America great, and promote and reward them. However, in most Two-Thirds World² countries, those qualities are not valued so highly. So when an American comes along and suggests what might be done, the local people who do not want to shame the guest by not taking the suggestion, move ahead on it even though they know it may not be the best way to go. The American receives gracious appreciation for the work done and continues the assertive, get-the-job-done attitude. Eventually this wears thin for the local people because they are constantly giving in to the unsuspecting American, who should have caught on to the ways of the local culture by now.

Generally, Americans think that if they are doing something wrong, someone in the local culture will tell them. Yet correcting a guest is considered very rude because it would cause the Americans to lose face and feel shame—something to be avoided at all costs. We will deal with this later. While exposure to Americans and their ways have brought some changes, allowing some local people to be more direct and confrontational, this would usually not be true of poorer people, rural people or anyone who has minimal contact with Westerners. Rather than blurt out your suggestions and ideas, encourage the local people to teach you to do it their way. They may insist that you know better because you are educated and from a highly technical culture, but don't give in quickly to this expression of cultural courtesy. There is a cultural dance going on. Get in step.

If you carry high levels of fear, suspicion and superiority and face a host of cultural differences, you will experience higher degrees of frustration, confusion, tension and embarrassment. But even worse, you will more likely make a bad decision when you come to the point of choosing a coping strategy. Negative attribution will kick in and you will jump to a negative conclusion about these people and their culture. If you are not careful at this point, you will easily slide into a variety of unproductive mindsets:

- Comparison: it takes twice as long to get things done; we can do it back home in half the time.
- Blame: these people are at fault for my frustration.
- Criticism: these people are really backward.
- Rationalization: it's impossible to understand these people and their culture.
- Withdrawal: I will do my job but I will not get emotionally involved with these people.

Notice the repetition of “these people.”

“THESE PEOPLE”?

Monitor the two words “these people.” When they frequently appear in

your speech and thoughts, it is a sure sign that you have not formed the kinds of bonds that make you think in terms of “we” instead of “they” or “these.” Also, when you hear yourself think or say “these people,” it may be a convenient way of not taking responsibility for your own feelings. If you blame your frustration on someone else, then you do not have to assume responsibility or consider making any changes. Slipping into that frame of mind will dull your ability to observe, inquire and listen. When that happens, learning and understanding stop.

USING THE CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT MAP

Suppose you have had a rough day and feel bad because of the negative emotions you felt (“The Facts of Life Abroad—Inevitables”). You also realize that you made some bad choices. Take a look at figure 8.1, the cultural adjustment map (p. 72), and answer the following questions.

1. What cultural difference prompted the negative emotion?
2. Which negative emotion(s) did you feel?
3. What thoughts ran through your mind during the negative emotion(s)?
4. Did your negative feelings prompt any action(s) you now regret? If so, describe.

Your answers will help you to name and describe a situation that took you on the lower track. The next step is to ask yourself, *How can I handle it better in the future?*

5. If you could do it over again, what would you do differently? Look at the upper track. Be specific about what you might have done differently.
6. Look at your response to the fourth question. Is there some way you might have broken trust with someone? What can you do to restore that trust?
7. Looking at the upper track and assuming that negative emotions will arise at some future point, what options did you have? Or what options would you prefer to exercise in future situations?

These simple steps force us to reflect, evaluate and plan. By doing this regularly, you will find yourself making wiser decisions, staying on the upper track and building stronger relationships. Eventually you will look back on your cross-cultural excursion as a high point in your life.

EXPECTATIONS REVISITED

In an earlier chapter we talked about expectations. You might want to review your expectations to assess how many of them were positive and how many were negative. The more your expectations are positive (while also being realistic), the more likely you will approach the culture with openness, acceptance and trust. If your expectations tend to be negative, you may be prone to fear, suspicion and inflexibility. In this case, you would be more vulnerable to making negative attributions about the people and culture whenever anything confuses or frustrates you. So if you are already biased toward fear, suspicion and inflexibility, you are more likely to experience more and more intense negative emotions during contact with the new culture. You might also act out some of those negatives so that the local people will realize you are not happy and at peace in their homeland.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide you with a cultural road map to help you navigate your way through the new culture. Should you get stuck somewhere or make a wrong turn, the map may help you identify where you went wrong and what you might do to correct things. The map also gives you a realistic picture of what is ahead of you both in challenges and in the joy of new friendships, hopefully, lifelong ones.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe your feelings when you realize that frustration, confusion, tension and embarrassment will be inevitable in another culture. Why do you feel this way?

2. Before entering the new culture, what can you do to increase openness, acceptance and trust? What can you do to reduce fear, suspicion and inflexibility?
3. How do you typically cope with difficult situations? By reflecting on those, what do you learn about yourself? What might you do to change how you handle difficult situations as you think about a cross-cultural experience?
4. When you offend someone, is it easy or difficult for you to apologize and make amends? When you think you have offended someone in another culture, what do you think the appropriate response(s) should be? Is it the same or different from your home culture?
5. How do you think the cultural adjustment map helps you understand the relationship between God and yourself?