
Skills for Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand.

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSETT

YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SOME KIND OF ACTIVITY in another culture. You are motivated to do a good job and make a difference. But the monkey and fish story in the first chapter showed us that good motives and good intentions are not enough to be effective. You really need a set of insights and skills to give feet to your good intentions and motives. This book is exactly about that: giving you skills to do the job well, so well that the people will want you to come back and stay longer.

This chapter attempts to do two things: first, to reinforce in a different way some of the skills we have talked about; second, to introduce some new and useful skills and ideas that will help you. When something happens that you are not sure how to handle, hopefully, one of these insights will provide you with a way to understand that situation and deal with it. I have found that acronyms help lodge ideas in people's memory.

IT TAKES TIME (ITT)

Cultural adjustment does not come quickly and, for some, not easily. Therefore, don't be so hard on yourself. Go into the new culture realizing that there will be bumps. But keep in mind too, that tens of thousands of others who have gone before you also had bumps and still made a

positive impact for the cause of Christ. They did it, and you can too.

So don't give up. That is exactly what Satan would like for you to do. But God has an important purpose for you being right where you are. He has something important for you and for the host country people. By persevering you will see the wondrous things God has in store. Virtually anything important will have some struggle attached to it. Those struggles will make you stronger and wiser if you don't give up.

A friend of mine who worked for one of the big three auto companies in the United States was sent to a Spanish-speaking country on a two-year assignment. He had little cultural orientation yet plunged into his work. He found the cultural issues overwhelming and, in a few weeks, found himself unable to function effectively. Before the end of his first month he returned to his U.S. office. He felt terrible, a complete failure. He was also confused. What went wrong? Why couldn't he adjust? Others had. What was wrong with him? My own analysis, apart from his having no cultural orientation, was that he tried to do too much too fast without attempting to get acquainted with his new office and living environment. It takes time to adjust, and if we ignore the adjustment process, we may pay dearly.

MONITOR, MONITOR, MONITOR (MMM)

What should we monitor? Our emotions! Why? Because they usually cause quick, unthinking reactions that can damage relationships. There are several steps involved in monitoring our emotions.

Step one. Think about what you are feeling. If the feelings are negative then put yourself on alert so you don't do anything that you will regret. So monitor your emotions, especially when they are negative.

Step two. Name the negative emotion: anger, frustration, confusion, embarrassment, fear, tension, anxiety, jealousy, envy, superiority or maybe a vague, but real discomfort. Try to give it a name. You cannot proactively deal with something that is not identified. If you cannot identify it, you tend to react; reactions usually cause other reactions and

things quickly go out of control. Now everyone becomes a victim. That inability to identify and properly manage a negative emotion quickly sabotages our well-meaning efforts.

Step three. Ask yourself what is causing the negative emotion. While step two was naming your emotion, step three is naming the situation that triggered this emotion in you. Describing the situation in your mind may accomplish several things. It disarms the emotional content by letting your mind take charge. It gives you a second or two to judge whether your emotions are justified or not. It also gives you a moment in which to replace reaction with a planned action, one that will give you more positive results.

Obviously, if you feel immediate physical threat, the thing to do is get out of harm's way. That reaction is wise and natural. But most of the time the situations you face will be of the more common cultural variety that can be dealt with in a more thoughtful way.

Step four. What options do you have? Options fall under several categories:

- Thoughts—be guided by the positive, the good and the constructive, resisting the tendency to blame and fault others.
- Speech—be guided by words of grace and sensitivity, resisting the harsh and judgmental.
- Actions—be guided by acts of love, gentleness and kindness, resisting the sharp and abrasive.

Step five. Choose the best thoughts, words and acts to express yourself even though you are frustrated enough to punch somebody's lights out. It is okay to feel that way sometimes, just don't act on it.

The bottom line is to figure out what is happening and turn it into a positive learning experience. Keep that goal in mind and work hard to get there.

PRIOR QUESTION OF TRUST (PQT)

Even though the last chapter focused on trust, I am mentioning trust

again here because it as an extremely important concept. Also, in the last chapter I spoke of it as an attitude, and in this chapter I am presenting trust more as a skill.

Most of us tend to react when we feel stress or frustration. Our reactions may be understood in our home culture but often are misunderstood in another culture and result in hurting innocent people. My experience suggests that when we hurt others, they usually do not tell us about it, at least not directly. It would cause us shame and loss of face. They would never dishonor us in this way.

Building trust, as I said earlier, is culturally defined. Let me illustrate. An automotive supplier in the United States had employees from an overseas customer visit his site for training on some new technology. Over a period of fifteen months, the American found the guests to be very inconsiderate because they asked personal questions and seemed to be more interested in small talk about family, hobbies and such. The guests thought the Americans were very inconsiderate because all they thought about was business and never seemed interested in the guests as people who were away from their families, strangers in the United States and isolated. Each group judged the other as inconsiderate because of the different cultural rules each had for building trust. Needless to say, the project was less successful than the respective companies had envisioned.

That which builds trust in your culture may not build trust in another culture. In fact, it may break trust. It would take several books to talk about how each culture builds trust. In most cases, we do it so intuitively in our culture that we do not even know it. If someone asks us how we build trust, we shrug our shoulders and say something like, "I don't know; it is something you just do." The same is true of other cultures.

So how do you learn to build trust? Some things are universal: smiling when meeting someone and frequently as the friendship develops; speaking positively about people of the host culture, their culture, their family, their country (everyone is proud of their homeland); expressing happiness in having the relationship; reciprocating in kind deeds and

gifts; and being willing to spend time with the people. In some cultures, trust is built by doing what you say you will do in the time you said it would be done. In other cultures, the time given to building the relationship builds the trust more than keeping a schedule.

Still, one must learn the local ways as well. How does this happen? Primarily through observation. Watch what good friends do with and to each other. How close do they stand to each other? Many cultures stand closer than the American who likes more space. What role does touch play? Some cultures are far more high touch than others. In fact, in some countries, two males or females who are good friends may walk down the street arm-in-arm or holding hands. Such physical expression has no sexual connotation—it is a way to show trust and friendship. If you are building a good friendship, do not be surprised if, without even thinking, the other person grabs your hand as you walk along and keeps on holding it. Your reaction may be to pull your hand away. But review the steps in the previous section on monitoring your emotions.

A friend of mine was walking down the sidewalk with a friend from the local culture. Suddenly she realized she was walking in the gutter. Her friend was walking so close and speaking right into her face that she unknowingly had kept moving away until she found herself off the sidewalk and in the gutter. She quickly monitored the situation, realized what was happening and, returning to the sidewalk, enjoyed the ongoing conversation knowing not to pull away.

STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL STRATEGY (SWS)

Sometimes your system will get overloaded with all the new things around you. You need a break to settle yourself, get your bearings again and come back to the situation refreshed. This is strategic withdrawal, and it is important to utilize it rather than explode, go into culture shock or get bitter and cynical.

Strategic withdrawal is like counting to ten to cool off and is a good idea when the pressure gets too intense. Hence the word *strategic*—when

it is just too much to stay involved in your activity and you feel like you are going to explode, cry or have some kind of outburst, take the time to withdraw. Physically remove yourself from the situation that causes the unbearable pressure or strain. The withdrawal should be relatively short depending on how long the pressure has been building up. For example, if you are at a party and you are feeling stressed out, take a five-minute strategic withdrawal to the bathroom, take a short walk or hang around people who relax you; then, when the pressure is back under control, reenter the situation.

Perhaps this is one reason why God gave us a day of rest—not only a day of worship but a strategic withdrawal from the burden and pace of the work world. God himself rested after the creation of the world. Taking a day or two off each week or taking an extended vacation each year are ways of keeping ourselves healthy physically, mentally and emotionally. When we are overseas my wife and I may go out for an evening to a nice Western restaurant or spend a weekend in a Western style hotel. The wonderful atmosphere not only refreshes but restores energy and perspective.

Keep in mind that strategic withdrawals taken too often or for too long may be a sign not of wise management of a situation but of culture shock. Physical and emotional isolation from the local people to listen to music, read American magazines or books, sleep, or hang out with your Western friends for extended periods signal culture shock, and this needs to be handled quickly. If you find yourself disengaging for large blocks of time, reread the chapter on culture shocks. Employ the aid of friends and senior people who have worked through these issues. They will help you laugh, understand and achieve objectivity as you work through the adjustment process.

LAUGH AT YOURSELF, LAUGH AT LIFE (LAY-LAL)

Having a good sense of humor gets us through many of life's tough spots. Humor relieves tension. It puts situations in perspective. It keeps us

from exploding or imploding. It gives everyone a chance to step back from a potentially damaging situation and try to turn it into a productive one.

But beware of the dangers of humor. While it is usually acceptable to laugh at oneself, it is risky to laugh at someone else until you are quite versed in the culture and the trust is strong. If you are in a group joking and having fun in a public place, local people may be glad to see that you are happy. However, they may also wonder whether you are laughing at them, especially if your humor is loud and accompanied by pointing at something or someone.

Humor rarely translates well across cultures. Usually one must be an insider to appreciate humor. If you are in a group of people of your own culture and people from the local culture are with you, they may not understand your jokes and remarks. It would be good to explain why a given story or remark causes you laughter. This accomplishes two things: the local people realize that their culture is not the object of the humor and they begin to understand the humor of your culture.

IT'S DIFFERENT (ID)

"It's different" may be the most useful little statement you can daily rehearse along with the Prior Question of Trust. The next section is on cultural differences that confuse us. Usually, when we get confused we look for someone or something to blame. Remember Eunice? She spoke in the passive and stative voices, which confused me. I blamed her for my confusion. Something was wrong with her and I needed to try to straighten her out. I saw her behavior as wrong, not as different. When I put something in the category of odd, confusing, weird, wrong or whatever, I am no longer able to learn from it. I have put the person or behavior in a category where I am right and the other is wrong. I am now superior and should try to correct the person. This damaging attitude is simple pride and puts up enormous barriers in relationships.

A simple skill I strongly encourage you to develop is found in a little

phrase: "It is not right or wrong; it is just different." Let me hasten to say that some things will fall into right and wrong, but my guess is that most of your experiences will best fit in the category of differences. If you put a confusing person or situation into the category of difference, you are more likely to suspend judgment, remain open and seek understanding. In doing so, your relationships will be maintained, you will get a quicker and better grasp of the culture in all its fascination, and you will have a far more enjoyable sojourn.

D I S C U S S I O N Q U E S T I O N S

1. Rate yourself on the following skills by circling the appropriate number.

a) It Takes Time (ITT):

I am a patient person

Very much 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very poor

I am a persevering person

Very much 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very poor

b) Monitoring (MMM):

I can monitor my thoughts

Very much 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very little

I can identify my emotions

Very much 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very little

c) Prior Question of Trust (PQT):

I build trust easily

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

I think about how my actions will affect others

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

d) Strategic Withdrawal Strategy (SWS):

I usually can handle new situations in a positive way

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

I tend to get angry when things do not go my way

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

e) Laugh at Self/Life (LAY-LAL):

I can laugh at my mistakes

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

I take life too seriously

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

f) It's Different (ID):

Differences intrigue me

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

I tend to put things in "right" and "wrong" categories

Very true 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not very true

2. What do you see as you look at the numbers you circled? What areas did you mark yourself as skillful? What areas might you need to work on?

3. Note any areas where you marked yourself low. How might that affect your entering and ministering in another culture? What might you do to improve that skill?