
Openness: How to Be Approachable

*Until the day you can greet a man as a man
and not be conscious of his face,
except for its individual beauty,
you are still acting as judge.*

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HAVE YOU HAD SOME PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE whom you really enjoy seeing? What is it about them that makes you feel good when you are around them? My experience suggests that those people express openness, acceptance and trust in relationships. These topics will occupy the next three chapters. Practicing openness, acceptance and trust will give you a big advantage in building wonderful relationships in your new cultural venture and will enrich your life wherever you are.

Remember the cultural adjustment map in the previous chapter? Openness, acceptance and trust are three skill sets we need to take as we approach another culture. They get us started in the right direction and help us stay on the upper track toward building positive connections with people who are different.

OPENNESS

Openness is the ability to welcome people into your presence and help them feel safe. A similar word is approachable. What is it that signals to people that they are welcome to approach us? Openness and approach-

ability sound simple enough, but many people are not naturally good at it. I know I am not. I must work at it.

An attitude, like openness, is an intangible that expresses itself in ways we can see. We can look for acts or behaviors, which reveal an attitude of openness. Once we are aware of what an open person does, we can observe and practice those behaviors until people sense that we are open too.

Someone in my life who best illustrates this quality is my wife's adopted mother, Helen. My wife, Muriel, a missionary kid, lost her father when she was just over two years old. Her mother continued living in rural Zimbabwe as a missionary. At seven years of age, my wife was sent away to boarding school in the city and later to a missionary children's home. One set of "parents" at the missionary children's home adopted Muriel, a relationship that has lasted for fifty years. When Muriel and I were dating, these parents, who had returned from Zimbabwe for furlough, adopted me too. I didn't realize it, but before I knew it, I was family. In fact, we are so much family that we, along with other adoptees, are part of their will. These amazing people best illustrate openness. I have tried to analyze how they do it.

I have had similar expressions of openness expressed toward me in nearly all the seventy-five countries I have traveled in. In this chapter, I am attempting to put my observations in concrete form through the life of one person who lived so successfully in a second culture. Please remember that openness, acceptance and trust, which are important qualities in every culture, may be expressed differently in different parts of the world. For example, eye contact, which communicates openness and equality in most Western cultures, communicates arrogance and even insolence in other cultures, especially if a younger person looks an older person in the eye. It is considered polite and proper for the younger person to look down toward the floor or lower than the eye level of the other person. In some cultures eye contact between a man and a woman has sexual overtones. Women in these cultures usually look down when a man approaches. Thus, you need to discover the cultural nuances in the

place you will be and make appropriate adjustments.

Smile genuinely. A genuine broad smile always greets us when we enter Helen's home. She lives near us, and nearly every Sunday, her small, unassuming house is the gathering place for ten to twenty people for dinner and the afternoon. Less than half the crowd is made up of blood relatives. New people are always being introduced. If they live in the vicinity, they soon become "family." Spontaneous laughter frequently erupts throughout the house as people connect. One might think this is a happy-go-lucky family with few cares in the world. Actually, not so. The family has seen its share of sorrow and hardship. Yet, Helen's smile to so many continuously warms the home, making it a safe place to relax and be ourselves.

Reach out. Helen proactively reaches out to people. She moves toward you either by seeing you coming and holding the door open or by physically drawing near as you enter. An eager hug awaits if you are so inclined. A touch on the arm and an enthusiastic "I'm so glad you could come," gives you the distinct impression that your presence has made her day. Immediately, you are also glad you came. During your visit she connects to find out how you are doing. She keeps moving toward you, yet remaining sensitive not to intrude.

Ask questions. I feel valued when people ask about my life, work and activities. Helen remembers everything about our lives just as though we were her own children. Her questions reveal honest interest. She listens well and follows up with more questions. The exchange unfolds naturally and in various directions. Her own thoughts and concerns flow gently into the stream of shared conversation. Unconsciously, the event becomes another bonding experience between parent and children.

Engage people. If Helen cannot engage you in conversation, she will invite you into a game or some creative project she has recently started, or ask your opinion on some matter. Yet, it is okay to quietly read a book or paper, doze off in a chair or watch TV. Her home is your home, and people are encouraged to do as they please. But she will do her best to make sure you feel welcome, comfortable, relaxed and, most important, safe.

Suspend judgment. When I first met Helen, I noticed she was slow to judge and tried to give everyone the benefit of a doubt. Before judgment she would try to find the facts and keep an open mind about the other person. It seemed she found it difficult to believe something negative about another person. When she did, it would be shared in the most gracious spirit. Then she would continue to make it a matter of prayer. This attribute contributed significantly to the safe atmosphere she built in her home.

Expressive. One might be inclined to think that Helen has few opinions and, perhaps, a wimpy spirit. Actually, she has quite strong opinions, sticks to her values, is in touch with her emotions and reveals all quite freely. I have often wondered how Helen can be open and accepting while also being quite confrontational on sensitive matters. After watching her for a couple years, I have noticed two qualities: First, her confrontation comes in the form of inquiring questions (as opposed to judgmental questions). She seeks to understand the other person's perspective before forming and expressing her own position. Second, she shows genuine interest in you as a person and in a commitment to sustaining the relationship. Thus, the positive atmosphere she has created becomes the loving context in which she may confront. Confrontation in this atmosphere usually produces positive results.

One healthy outcome of her open expressiveness is that you are rarely in the dark about her feelings. You know where you stand with her—no game playing or charades.

Generous. Helen quickly offers food, drink, candy or little gifts revealing that she is thinking about you and values you. She discovers your birthday and the entire extended family showers you with gifts on your special day as well as Christmas and whenever she may feel like it. Mostly you realize that she gives of herself for the benefit of others. The tangible expressions let you know what is in her heart.

Slow to bid farewell. I must confess to relief when certain people leave my house. One never gets that impression when you leave Helen's house. Her face and words reveal genuine regret that you must leave so

soon, in spite of the fact you have been there for four hours or longer. “Are you sure you can’t stay a little longer?” are frequent words as my wife and I signal it is time for us to leave.

Invitations to return. Often Helen calls to find out if we can come to Sunday dinner and stay for the afternoon. Part of it is to plan for the food, but more of it is to let us know that she wants us to come. It is a good feeling to be wanted. We always feel welcome and safe. People from other cultures have felt her openness in the same delightful ways.

These are some of the qualities that I have noticed not only in Helen, but also in people everywhere who communicate openness. It is a great gift to receive and a great gift to give.

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

1. Are there any other ways that people you know express openness?

2. Of the expressions of openness mentioned in this chapter, which ones do you need to work on to be a more open person?

3. Rate yourself on the behaviors of openness. On a scale of 1-10, how do you rate yourself? (1 = very poor; 10 = very good).
 - Genuine smile of greeting _____
 - Reaching out to others _____
 - Asking nonjudgmental questions _____
 - Active listening _____
 - Engaging others in conversation _____
 - Suspending judgment _____
 - Expressing yourself _____
 - Generous _____
 - Slow to end the meeting _____
 - Looking forward to the next meeting _____

Do your scores show that you are an open person?

4. Can you identify any areas where you could improve? How? Thinking about the culture you plan to enter, might any of these be culturally unacceptable? Which and why? How can you find out?
5. Sometimes it is a good idea to see if others see us the way we see ourselves. Give this list to three to five other people and ask them to score you according to their perception of how well you express each of the characteristics on the list. If the scoring was done anonymously, you might get more honest set of scores from the others. Then compare their scores with your own.