
Square Heads and Round Heads

*We have been created in the image of God,
and it is God-likeness we share. . . .
Thinking that people are all like me
can only lead to disillusionment.
Am I the center of the universe?*

GLADIS DEPREE

BEFORE THE HUMAN RACE, diversity existed in the Trinity. God was diverse: three persons. Then when God decided to create, the array of diversity was staggering. The human race began with diversity: male and female. God apparently loves difference; he created so much of it. Most of us, however, prefer sameness. Difference makes us feel uncomfortable because we are not sure how to respond. Entering another culture is to encounter daily difference. Comfort in another culture occurs only when you understand difference. Prospering in another culture is learning how to celebrate difference. This chapter takes us a step closer to being able to do just that.

A NEW GAME

Imagine you are a good athlete. You are good at your sport and enjoy the game, say baseball. Someone across town invites you to play a game that looks similar to your sport, and you agree. But the game, called cricket, has different rules and requires different skills. Balls and bats are used, but in a different way. You try to play, but mostly the game is frustrating. Trying harder does not work. Sometimes you want to give

up rather than adjust to this new game. It would be easier to go back and play the game you know so well. But you decide to hang in there. Soon you learn the new rules, develop the skills and enjoy playing cricket. You have grown into something new and different and feel better for the experience.

Entering a new culture is much the same. The rules and skills that were natural for you in your home culture do not work very well in the new culture. People of the new culture do things differently. Language, transportation, dress, food, shopping and a variety of other things are different. People have different values and attitudes that seem strange to you. You can't play this game very well, at least not yet. But with patience you can learn the new rules and begin to enjoy being in the new culture. The balance of this book is designed to help you learn the rules and build the skills for a positive experience in another culture.

PICTURE IT THIS WAY

As we enter another culture it is important to get the right perspective. We grow up looking, for the most part, like the people around us (figure 7.1).¹ We share a common language, core values, patterns of behavior and the basic rules for conducting our lives. If we grew up in square culture, we would look square. If we grew up in round culture, we would look round.

When you leave the comfort of your own culture and enter another, you don't leave your squareness (cultural baggage) behind; you take it with you (see figure 7.2). You become the proverbial square peg in a round hole. At this point you have a choice, as seen in figure 7.3: you can maintain your squareness, or you can choose to adjust, knock off some "corners" to fit in and identify more and more with your host culture. By adapting to the local ways, you will find greater fulfillment for yourself and greater effectiveness in the activity God has placed before you.

People grow up looking very much like the cultural background in which they were raised. If your cultural background is “square,” you turn out to be square. If it is “round,” you are round.

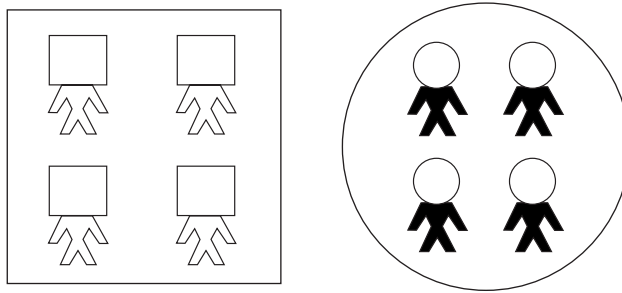


Figure 7.1. Square and Round Cultures

When you leave the safety of your own culture and enter another, you do not leave your cultural baggage behind. You take it with you. And you may feel like the proverbial square peg in a round hole.

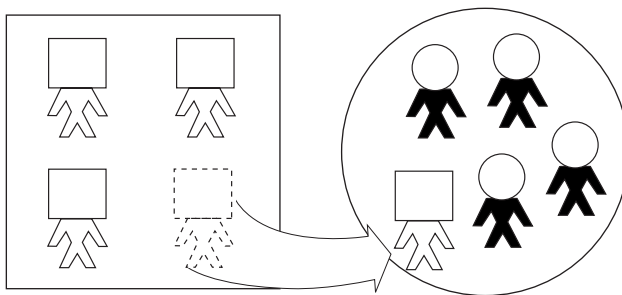


Figure 7.2. Fitting into Another Culture

But you can adjust; you can fit in. You can adapt yourself to this new culture. You can make the transition effectively and gradually identify more and more with your host country colleagues. The result is greater fulfillment and productivity for you and your employer.

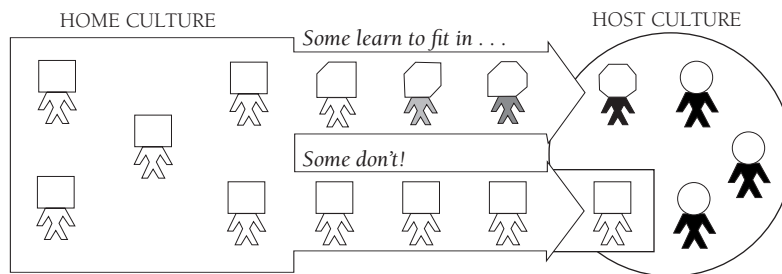


Figure 7.3. Adjusting and Refusing to Adjust

At the bottom of figure 7.3, notice that some from square culture maintain their squareness. They choose not to adjust to the local culture but to remain the same as if they were in their home culture. Ponder this: By refusing to change or lose any squareness, what messages does the square-headed person send to the round-headed people? Write your responses below.

Here are some of my responses. The square person communicates, “I don’t care if I adjust to your situation, learn your language or do things the way you do. I am better educated. My culture is more technologically advanced. My way is better than yours, so why should I change?” Round people could read this as insensitive and arrogant.

What messages do the round-headed people receive when the square person does not adapt to round culture? Write your responses below.

Here are my responses to this situation. Round people feel that the square person does not care enough to make any changes. Round people may think that in order to establish a relationship, they must lose their roundness and become like square people. How unfortunate that people of other cultures receive any of these messages from us even though, if we send them, we do so unintentionally! Even so, the people of the host culture will still receive the message. We are always communicating, verbally and nonverbally. Therefore, we must be vigilant, aware of how and what we are communicating.

Notice the better option in figure 7.3 where another square person is entering round culture. Slowly over time the square person takes on some roundness as a result of experiencing the culture. This symbolizes the adjustment process of fitting into the culture. Amazingly, you dis-

cover that any squareness you lose was never important.

What are some of the ways in which we can lose our squareness during the time we are in another culture? Make a list of at least six things you can do to help yourself take on roundness or, conversely, lose some squareness—even if you plan to be in another culture for just a short time.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

My list of adjustments would be to

- learn greetings and key words in the new culture
- buy and wear some pieces of local clothing
- smile frequently
- resist making negative statements about the people or culture
- ask questions and listen attentively
- spend as much time with local people as possible and minimize the time spent with people of my culture
- eat the local food as long as it is safe

As the square person becomes more round, what is the message that is being communicated to the round people? Write down your responses.

The messages the round people are likely to receive are that square people enjoy round people, even respect them. Our (round) ways must be good since square people are adopting some of our behaviors and values (becoming a little like us and not trying to change us to look like them). Square people are humble, willing to adjust. Square people are

willing to learn from us. They think we are important, they want to communicate with us, they want to be our friends, and they think of us as human beings equal to them.

As you can see, very powerful messages are sent simply through our willingness to make some adjustments to the new culture. The things we set aside from our home culture in order to adjust to the local culture are usually not core values, but less important things. Yet the impact of those adjustments makes an enormous difference in how effective you will be in the ministry God has for you.

Obviously, when it comes time to return to square culture, the person who has lost some squareness will have won the respect of the local people and will have left behind the sweet aroma of Christ. You will also discover that you return richer because God has added new beauty to your life. What you give up is nothing compared to what you gain. Multitudes who have gone before you attest that the benefits of adjusting and fitting in far outweigh any sacrifices.

BUSINESSPEOPLE AND SQUARENESS

There is another side, however. Businesspeople want to return to their home organization and incorporate some of the things they learned while on their international assignment. One automotive executive, after three years in Spain, was eager to share some of his thoughts with his U.S. colleagues. His enthusiasm died when his colleagues greeted him with statements like “Bet you’re glad to be back in civilization.”²

Everyone struggles with squareness. Anyone going from one culture to another must deal with squareness and roundness. Businesspeople struggle, as do missionaries, tent-makers, short-termers and anyone who tries to establish a meaningful relationship with local people. Businesspeople often face an extra challenge because they may have limited time to adjust, arrive with a heavy task assignment, have little or no preparation on how to be effective in the new culture and gravitate to other expatri-

ates. It takes determination to break out of squareness, but it can be done.

The latest story I heard was about a businessperson who was given three days by his U.S. company to get a signed contract on a big competitive deal in South America. Instead, a European company got the contract. The reason, I am told, is that negotiators from the European firm spent ten days in the South American city with the local company. The first seven days were spent in getting to know each other—in social and recreational time together. During the last three days, they hammered out the details of the contract. When asked by the U.S. firm, the local officials said the difference was that the European negotiators took the time to get to know them as people, to build the relationships. One local person said something like, “You Americans had a better product, but you never took the time to know us.”³

In the United States (square culture), people judge the merits of the product and pricing and make their decision based on those facts. In much of the world (round culture), it is not so much the merits of the product and price, but the merits of the person and the relationship. When square people cannot or will not become round in their thinking and behaving, their message and goals are likely to be ineffective. Becoming round—taking time to build a good relationship before plunging into the task—is not a matter of right or wrong but of difference. We are free to adjust to cultural differences, and the wise person will do so.

This situation works both ways. Often, people from round cultures will come to the square culture—the United States or another Western country—to do business or for some kind of project. The round people will take excessive time (by square culture standards) in small talk, social time and relationship building. The square person may interpret this as wasteful and unprofessional and may seriously question whether the round person can meet deadlines and be efficient. We can easily misinterpret each other without intending it. Later, several chapters are given to value differences in round and square cultures.

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

1. What cultural baggage are you willing to shed in order to better fit into another culture?
2. In what practical ways can you show acceptance of people in another culture?
3. Have you ever felt like a square peg in a round hole? When? How did you respond?
4. While there are differences, what similarities do you see between people of differing cultures?
5. How can you use these similarities to connect with people cross-culturally?
6. Do you identify more with the businessperson from the square culture or with the businessperson from the round culture? Why?