Unconscious Culture

O.K., I Blew it. And I knew better. After all, I've got a book on the subject right on my shelf. It's easy to blame it on the stress, the pushed schedule, the history and all the other intangibles.

But if I want to be honest, I just fell into the same trap that we all fall into. The formal name for it is ethnocentrism[1], but the rest of the world knows it as just plain old foolishness.

How Did it Happen?

How could I walk into a room and inflict my twisted, ugly American routine on these people? Because it was easy: a whole lot easier than thinking things through, communicating with these folks on their own terms, and helping them to succeed in their endeavors. I was too caught up in my reactions to a bad idea, and it was a bad idea I was intimately familiar with. First, I helped to create the beast, and then I fought to place it in the corporate *Gehenna*[2] where it so richly deserved to spend eternity. And there it was, back from the dead, and there they were, and it was just too easy to unload on a convenient target. Righteous indignation, verbal acuity, and cultural myopia: it's a powerful brew that can make us cross-eyed and indifferent to pain.

What am I Talking About?

A bit of ugliness I perpetrated on some colleagues from India. These folks are with us, right here in River City, and there are more who would like to join us here in the land of opportunity. And we better start getting used to it. If we're going to meet our common goals, we'll need to find a way past the cultural hurdles that can so easily compromise our efforts. Along the way, we'll trigger all kinds of reactions: some of them conscious, others driven by the unconscious forces we all harbor. To atone for my sins, and to promote a greater understanding, I offer the following thoughts with all due humility ... and with the hope that our friends can forgive another ugly American for his foolishness.

The Best Description

Adrenaline-fueled, incoherent jabbering delivered with enough venom to stop a herd of elephants. Viewing my actions from the other side of the fence, that's the impression I must have left. Hardly a proud legacy for someone who has studied intercultural communication to some depth. The details aren't important; let's just say I abused a convenient target in order to vent some long-standing frustrations. And they took it. For no good reason. Why? Probably because it wasn't the first time they had to deal with a frustrated American hell-bent on making a point with their favorite sledgehammer.

In retrospect, I'm a little awed at their patience; at their calm, cool demeanor. But after reviewing some information about their culture, I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. And I doubt they were shocked by my actions. It was a pretty typical pratfall, the art of bumping into the dark corners of intercultural communication.

For the benefit of Mr. Kite, let's chart out a topography of some of the common stumbling blocks[3]:

Assumption of Similarities

We all have two eyes, two ears, various biological functions in common; this makes it easy to assume we have a basis for clear communication. The catch here is that the values, beliefs and attitudes surrounding the common biological and social needs varies from culture to culture. It's an easy block to stumble over, because it's more comfortable to think that "people are people" than it is to acknowledge the differences and risk psychic discomfort.

This assumption of similarity often plays itself out in the non-verbal realm: the stereotypes of the flustered native, wildly gesticulating and shouting at a foreigner: these exist for a reason. While gestures can be used to express a basic idea, we should not "read" things into the non-verbal actions of people we have just met.

Because Americans have a special reputation for ethnocentricity, let's get to know a few more corners of this coffee table before we bruise our shins against it. First, the trappings of Western culture are rapidly permeating the globe: when we

encounter people from other cultures, they are often dressed like us. When combined with an advanced fluency in English, it's difficult to avoid this stumbling block. And as someone attains a high degree of adaptation to a different culture, things can get even more confusing.

Case in Point

For a time, I had the privilege of working with an engineer from India who had been in America for several years. This engineer, in addition to attaining a high degree of adaptation, had a warm and engaging personality -- talking to her, it was very easy to lose sight of the complexity of the interaction. I'm pretty sure I managed to offend her on a regular basis, but she was far too polite to call me out on it. Looking back, I've learned that it's easy to achieve a false sense of success if you use the superficial behavioral cues as a channel marker.

The assumption of similarity has yet another form. Once we've faced the complexity of interacting with people from other cultures, it's tempting to seek out some knowledge, and then use it as if all people from a given culture will share certain qualities. This can lead to stereotyped thinking and blind us with a false sense of "knowing what to expect." The experts advocate building a framework for understanding by studying a culture's history, politics, art and literature. In the long run, they suggest developing an investigative, non-judgmental attitude and a high tolerance for ambiguity is more effective than browsing a list of cultural "do's and don'ts."

Language Differences

Few people miss this one. Eventually, everyone feels the anguish of English. For native speakers, interacting with someone who is learning their local idiom can trigger emotionally charged reactions, similar to those I have when attempting to use French. When we're stripped of our linguistic tools, we get very close to the jungle -- at a deep, primeval level, we remember how precarious a thing civilization really is, and how much it relies on a *lingua franca* for its existence.

For various reasons, English is emerging as the language of international business. When we attempt to bridge the gap, it helps to remember the tendency of people to cling to a single definition of a term in a new language, regardless of the context in which it is used. When faced with the complexity of English, non-native

speakers often rely on a concrete definition of a term in order to maintain some order. It's understandable, and it's up to the native speakers to recognize it, and then gently surface the issue of managing different meanings of a term that is causing confusion.

Nonverbal Misinterpretations

People from different cultures live in different sensory worlds. Generally, people only see, hear, feel and smell that which has some meaning or importance for them. We abstract from the total range of sensory input -- we have to in order to avoid being overwhelmed -- and place that which we recognize in our personal world and interpret it using the frame of reference provided by culture. This phenomenon of abstraction and interpretation is at the heart of the difficulties that stem from the use of nonverbal signs and behaviors: we view certain aspects of human behavior, and then apply our own cultural "filter" and fall prey to false or misleading interpretations.

It is possible to learn the nonverbal "codes" of other cultures[4], but it requires time and is much easier if there are informal settings available to carry out the study. While some cues, signs and behaviors are relatively easy to get a handle on, some of the less obvious aspects can be extremely difficult to understand (e.g., the handling of time, spatial relationships and subtle signs of respect and formality).

One of the more embarrassing events in my personal history involves a young man from Belgium. The year, 1987. The place, Breckenridge, Colorado. The scenario: your humble narrator was managing a team of busboys in a restaurant at the base of Peak 8. It was, in some ways, an idyllic time and place -- AIDS was just breaking, the sexual climate was, well, active, and the young man from Belgium was far more interested in getting to know the clientele than he was in cleaning tables (go figure). Others were naturally upset about pulling his weight while he chatted up the ladies. Eventually, after many frustrating conversations, I had to fire him. If I want to be honest, it wasn"t the work habits that were at issue ... we were just plain envious of his ability to read the nonverbal cues so well. That man was gifted, and we were jealous. And we just couldn't stand it ... so we put him out of our misery.

Preconceptions and Stereotypes

People are forever motivated to reduce the threat of the unknown; the alternative is to accept an intolerable level of anxiety whenever we leave the house. In short, our preconceptions and stereotypes help us to reduce that anxiety. At some level, we recognize that the over-generalized, second-hand beliefs provide some basis for "making sense" of the people we encounter, and we're all too willing to use them whether or not they are accurate or fit the situation. Indeed ... Americans have to raise the specter of Archie Bunker in order to realize how damaging the practice can be within a culture, let alone between cultures.

Tendency to Evaluate

People are judgmental. We like to use the quick and easy evaluation to set aside the troubling aspects of ambiguity. It's right or wrong, acceptable or outrageous, proactive or reactive, polite or insolent ... and we want to file it away, whatever it is, now. In the rush to evaluate, we tend to close our minds to the thoughts and feelings expressed from the world view of the other. It's very easy to glide on past the obvious: everyone considers their cultural way of life right, proper and natural; it rarely occurs to people that there are other ways that are just as proper, but are merely different. The point here is not to suspend all judgment, but to look and listen empathetically rather than use the thick screen of value judgments to make our lives easier. If, after careful consideration, there is a real conflict due to mismatched values and world views, then it is appropriate to seek out a resolution strategy in some form.

I have several lumps in my noggin formed by encounters with this stumbling block (phrenology, anyone?). One of the uglier episodes from my past involves two gentlemen from South Africa. I met them while working in Breckenridge back in the 80s. At the time, the apartheid conflict was near its height, and these two natives had served in the South African army before arriving in America. The general consensus was that they had been involved in the conflicts in some way. In the rush to evaluate, it was easier to convict them on sight than it was to find out what they had actually done, and how they felt about it. It's curious how easy our commitment to Constitutional rights can evaporate when it becomes expedient; and I'm always surprised by how useful they are when we're faced with a challenge.

High Anxiety

Tension, stress, sweaty palms and shaky voices. This stumbling block can hit you on two levels: in your head, the difficulties presented by the other stumbling blocks can trigger stress, which in turn leads us to become defensive or hostile. On a physical level, the mere presence of a "stranger" can trigger a basic fight or flight reaction that can undermine our best intentions. We can condition ourselves to take the edge off the physical reactions and defuse our natural responses. The blocks in our head, however, are harder to avoid. The stress can become unbearable and trigger a defensive reaction that leads us to distort incoming messages and send out a mixed bag of value, motive and affect cues. And the effect can build on itself, leading from defense to aggression, hostility and a host of other reactions. On occasion, folks from other cultures seem to isolate themselves in small "enclaves" -- if we understand their behavior as a coping mechanism, rather than rushing to categorize them as "unfriendly," we can set aside any resentment and approach them with an honest commitment to professionalism.

The six stumbling blocks listed above, along with other factors, often leads to some measure of "culture shock" for those who spend a significant amount of time immersed in another culture. In short, the stress that goes along with intercultural encounters accumulates over time, leading to exhaustion, desperation and depression. Like any disease, culture shock has different effects, degrees of severity and durations for each individual -- therefore, we should not presume that any of the folks we meet are suffering to any given degree; rather, we should anticipate the unknown and retain an open attitude with each individual we encounter.

In a general sense, it may help to remember that culture shock is not exclusive to people from other countries. America is sufficiently large and culturally diverse to experience the effect when interacting with people from other regions of the country or from different socio-economic groups. Personally, I often feel lost in a strange land. When I'm stressed, I sometimes fall back into "kitchen mode," a somewhat barbaric form of behavior I picked up while working in restaurants. In some ways, it's a milder form of the type of cultural dislocation described by Richard Wright in Native Son. In Wright's novel, set in the 1920s, an African-American man is suddenly immersed in white culture. Dislocated and unsure of the appropriate behavior, he commits a greater crime trying to avoid offending a

new and alien code of behavior. If we want to avoid becoming the next Bigger Thomas in the workplace, we need to recognize that communication is a complex challenge. There are no shortcuts to success, only the overall goal of becoming competent. And that takes time, patience, the courage to admit your mistakes, and a measure of curiosity tempered by self-control. And who knows, maybe another book or two on the old shelf.

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[1] Ethnocentrism: 1) The universal tendency for any people to put its own culture and society in a central position of priority and worth (Felix Keesing).

[2] Gehenna: 1) A valley near Jerusalem where garbage was burned; 2) hell or a place of suffering.

[3] Drawn from: Barna, Laray. "Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication. "Intercultural Communication: A Reader, 7th Ed., International Thomson Publishing, 1994. 337-346.

[4] See Beyond Culture and The Silent Language by Edward Hall for more on the use of time and space across cultures. For a historical perspective, see Myth of the Eternal Return and The Sacred and the Profane by Mircea Eliade.