
Intercultural Competency, or “*I thought I made myself clear?!*”

When we work internationally, relocate to other countries for projects or to start up and manage businesses overseas, there is not much available to teach us how to be effective. Many have their hats handed to them¹. You can find websites to warn about baksheesh in Egypt, or business cards in Japan, but few consultants have successfully made this topic their core business. One is Fons Trompenaars² who began publishing for a non-academic audience twenty years ago.

I recently discovered a very concise definition of the problem and an approach to a solution for cross-cultural communications in *Metaphor* by Lakoff and Johnson³:

When people who are talking don't share the same culture, knowledge, values and assumptions, mutual understanding can be especially difficult. Such understanding is possible through the negotiation of meaning. To negotiate meaning with someone, you have to become aware of and respect both the differences in your backgrounds and when these differences are important. You need enough diversity of cultural and personal experience to be aware that divergent world views exist and what they might be like. You also need patience, a certain flexibility in world view, and a generous tolerance for mistakes, as well as a talent for finding the right metaphor to communicate the relevant parts of unshared experiences or to highlight the shared experiences while deemphasizing the others. Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of unshared experience. This skill consists, in large measure of the ability to bend your world view and adjust the way you categorize your experience. Problems of mutual understanding are not exotic; they arise in all extended conversations where understanding is important.

...When the chips are down, meaning is negotiated: you slowly figure out what you have in common, what is safe to talk about, how you can communicate unshared experiences or create a shared vision. With enough flexibility in bending your world view and with luck and skill and charity, you may achieve some mutual understanding.

To be very American; “So what’s the bottom line? I don’t have time for this soft stuff!”

The bottom line? Add another 5% contingency!

(This white paper was written on flights between Atlanta, Munich, Sao Paulo, and France)

¹ Try translating that into Urdu!

² <http://ridingthewavesofculture.com/>

³ *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, second edition 2003, University of Chicago Press