

Being Global: Life at the Interface

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Human resource professionals who work with people of many nationalities and traditions outside their own culture face a similar challenge whether their company is multinational, international, transnational or global. Few of us have achieved a worldcentric level of consciousness and the requisite skills for managing our relationships according to the human resource policies that many of our companies have now mandated. Most companies that are or aspire to being global have begun to espouse universalistic policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of human attributes that cannot be altered or easily changed such as age, gender, ethnic background, religion, veteran status and so on.. Many of us work for organizations that base promotion and compensation on performance and merit. These policies are intended to be applied globally in spite of local practices that are based on antithetical assumptions and traditions and despite our own possible quirks of mind and manner which may be out of the awareness of those of us who are entrusted with administering them.

In his chapter "On the Way to Global: Part 1" in *A Brief History of Everything*, Ken Wilber observes "A global perspective is a rare, elite, extraordinary perspective of great depth, and there are relatively few individuals who actually make it to that depth" (1996, p. 157). Often individuals whose life circumstances have exposed them to more than one language and culture during their formative years struggle with unresolved questions of identity that affect their ability to relate effectively to the variety of people they encounter regularly in their work (Bennett, J., 1993). Even if a person raised in the local tradition has been educated abroad and appears to be linguistically and culturally savvy when communicating in English, she may be motivated by a lack of satisfaction with her own cultural circumstances that limit her understanding and effectiveness, especially with members of her own original culture. She may combine a discordant mix of mannerisms that grate in both directions rather than help harmonize the diversity present in the situation.

At a conference on human resources in emerging markets sponsored by Cornell in November 1996 in Vietnam, the 41 participants from 15 countries in Asia became particularly animated and involved in discussing the phenomenon of "returnees," people who leave their country to be educated abroad and are later posted back there by a foreign company. While the issue may be particularly emotional in Vietnam because of war-related politics, the group recognized a common, deeper problem of cultural gaps and resulting communication problems. These may be caused by changes during the elapsed time as well as the naïve assumption on the part of many of the people involved that the returnee would be a particularly advantaged and effective employee. In addition to a special compensation package guaranteed to incite envy, he would be expected to have the combined advantages of the latest management or technical education and

experience abroad with native linguistic and cultural expertise. Many returnees have been surprised at the difficulties they have encountered. Lack of realization that they were out of touch with a society that had evolved in their absence combined with ambivalence about returning to a culture they had earlier sought to escape can produce a sense of superiority which engenders resentment. The unexpected problems that may emerge can be particularly painful and difficult to resolve for all sides: the local employees, the returnee, and the foreign management.

It may take a newly arrived expatriate considerable time to discover that impressive English competence masks these problems or a lack of other technical skills essential for fully functioning in an assigned role. Similarly an expat with long experience in a culture other than her own may be so affected by her extended exposure that the identity that has unwittingly emerged may turn out to be rather muddled and ineffective. Culture brokers may not always be reliable guides, especially if they are self-satisfied and settled too comfortably in that role.

Life at the interface is rarely simple, but it does provide unrelenting opportunities for promoting awareness and the inner transformations that can help individuals develop so that they can actually grow to inhabit a global mindset. This promises to be a life-long process of cultivating consciousness of one's values, assumptions, beliefs and behaviors and making an ongoing effort to transcend them for something larger without losing a centerpoint that gives the personality coherence, clarity and credibility. In *Working on yourself alone*, Arnold Mindell describes the process of developing one's "metacommunicator" as reducing one's identification with any particular aspect of oneself (1990). The more the metacommunicator expands, the larger one's consciousness and the less the personality is besmirched by one's shadow. In *Mindsets*, Glen Fisher offers practitioners a checklist for diagnosing the variety of predispositions to perceive and reason one may encounter when living and working in the midst of dynamic international situations. He cautions, "And while most people will want to retain their own basic cultural identity, absorbing other cultures to the degree that one remains an integrated personality is a valid objective for anyone who wants to work effectively and happily abroad," (Fisher, 1988, p.177). Milton Bennett has developed a scale for evaluating one's response to cultural differences that moves from denial through defense, minimization, acceptance and adaptation to integration (Bennett, 1993). Understanding this scale and the levels of consciousness it describes can promote evolving awareness for both those who aspire to be intercultural experts as well as neophytes.

Whether we have just arrived or been on the international scene for decades, we all need to keep growing and transcending our current level of being and relating. Working internationally provides us with daily opportunities to check our assumptions and refine ourselves.

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