

Cross Cultural Awareness: Minimising Cultural Imperialism in a Globalising World

American/European culture is spreading ever further throughout the world, and with it the consumerist ideology that everything is for sale. Images from other cultures are routinely used in advertising, marketing and fashion. In a globalising world, it can seem that we are all becoming more and more the “same” – same jeans, same trainers, same mobile phones. It can be all too easy to assume that we think similarly too.

The reality is very different – the socialisation of every child into a particular culture and language ensures that different ways of perceiving and making sense of the world are “in the bones” of each person. In spite of marketing and advertising, culture is not a “lifestyle choice”. No one can step outside the culture and language which are embedded within them – we each have a unique lens by which we make sense of the world.

There are still (thankfully), enormous differences in those cultural lens - different cultural understandings, different ways of making sense of life and the world around us - but, particularly for those have been socialised into the “superiority” mindset of American/European cultures, there is always a danger of assuming that other people see the world as you do. How can you minimise this cultural imperialism? How can you help your staff validate and support the unique genius within other, sometimes very different, cultural understandings?

- **Self reflection**

Because no one can step outside their own culture, people usually assume that their own culture is “normal”, and are rarely consciously aware of the assumptions they make when judging and experiencing the world. The first task, therefore, is to help your staff reflect on their **own** culture, to make explicit the values by which they judge others and their assumptions about how the world “should” be. To help them to be aware of these assumptions, why not design some simple cultural self awareness exercises? (Advice, design and facilitation are available from the author.) If you can see your own culture more clearly and understand how it affects your own attitudes and values, you are far more likely to be able to accept that people from other cultures may see the world differently. You are also far less likely to want to impose your own values and attitudes on others.

- **Humility**

Whenever you go to “help” in another country, it is sometimes easy to forget that other people have lived there for millennia. They know more than you do! Accepting one’s own ignorance is not easy, and to listen and learn, rather than rush in and “help” requires humility, patience and a real capacity for respectful listening.

- **Listening**

If you **can** listen and be seen to listen, you can create a working relationship which naturally assumes local culture and knowledge to be the predominant contribution. You can then present knowledge from your own culture tentatively, with a clear message that its relevance to local culture needs to be carefully negotiated. It is then much more likely that both parties will be able to develop a relationship which is based on mutual respect and will be mutually beneficial for both parties.

- **Facilitation**

If you can accept your own ignorance and accept that the people with whom you are working are the experts on their own life and experiences, you will be able to recognise and validate local skills and knowledge. As someone from “outside” it is up to **you** to creatively adapt your own skills, experience and knowledge to the culture of those with whom you are working, not to try and change other people to fit in with your assumptions about how someone else’s life “should” be. Rather than being a teacher or trainer giving instructions, it **is** possible to facilitate a synthesis of cultures: to validate the wisdom of the culture in which you are working, while thoughtfully offering the best from your own culture.

What follows are some general principles which may help minimise the imposition of one culture’s understandings on another – principles which are essential to enhance and maintain the wisdom of all cultures in a rapidly globalising world.

Principles to guide sensitive cross cultural awareness

- **Develop self awareness of your own assumptions, values and ways of making sense of experience: assumptions in your own culture, for example individuality, competitiveness, achievement, rational understanding and expressing independent opinions, are not universal.**
- **Listen with care, respect and patience**
- **Adapt to cultural norms within your own boundaries**
- **Acknowledge the uniqueness of local language and the cultural context and concepts embedded within it**
- **Accept your own ignorance with humility: find a mentor/guide**
- **Create an atmosphere that assumes local culture and knowledge to be the predominant contribution: present**

knowledge from your own culture tentatively, with a clear message that its relevance to local culture may be limited

- **Recognise and facilitate local skills and knowledge: the people with whom you are working are the experts on their own life and experiences, not the “higher status”, “qualified” professional**
- **Minimise the decisions for which you take responsibility.**
- **Maintain flexibility: creatively adapt your own skills, experience and knowledge to the experiences of those with whom you are working**
- **Facilitate a synthesis of cultures: listen, support, value and learn from the wisdom of the culture in which you are working, while offering the best and most appropriate of your own culture in wise and thoughtful ways**
- **Accept in your heart the paradox: those who think they are going to “receive” and learn from you, will teach you more than you will teach them.**
- **“Start with what people know, build with what they have”***

* This is the ethos of International Service, UK

Additional Reading

Chambers, R. (2003) **Whose reality counts?** ITDG Publishing: London.

Sachs, J. (2003) **The Dignity of Difference.** Continuum: London.