
----- WHAT'S UP, DOC? -----

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"Creating Leadership Solutions for Profit and Growth"

THIS MONTH'S THEME: CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

I am delighted and a little humbled to see how many of the newer subscribers to this e-Newsletter come from outside the United States. Though I try to give each edition a personal, even local flavor, I try also to strike upon universal themes, and so I welcome this growing diversity of subscribers. In a time when mutual understanding among diverse peoples seems in short supply, I welcome all comers to "What's Up, Doc?!"

And that leads to this month's theme: Cross Cultural Communication.

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THIS MONTH'S QUOTES:

"No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking." – Ruth Benedict, 1934

"Culture is simply how one lives and is connected to history by habit." – LeRoi Jones

1. LEARNING ANOTHER CULTURE: GETTING STARTED

DIRECT EXPERIENCE is the best way to begin to learn any culture. Just as the best way to learn a new language is to become immersed in that

language, so too is it most helpful to learn another culture by jumping right in. This may not always be practical, but radio stations, music, trips to religious organizations or other clubs that cater to members of a specific group – all of these things can be helpful ways to begin.

DIFFERENCES CAN feel like a threat at first. No one likes to feel like a stranger, and feeling unable to communicate or to decipher aspects of behavior that don't fit with our own habitual experiences can make any of us feel alone. This is a natural part of human experience, but even so, it is important to keep these feelings in perspective and remember that differences are less important than commonalities.

WE TEND TO OVERLOOK SIMILARITIES and notice just the differences when we first begin to interact with members of another culture. And then, when we apply the standards of interpretation that we would use in our own cultures to the behavior of those in the unfamiliar culture, we will draw mistaken conclusions. We all share 98% of the same DNA, and we are all far more alike than we are different, but that's easy to forget in the beginning.

STEREOTYPING DUE TO OVERGENERALIZATION is a common occurrence, especially among those who only interact with another culture infrequently. When we are faced with uncertainty, the human mind naturally seeks to create some order or system from what we observe. This is especially true when we may feel vulnerable due to uncertainty. So the mind creates its own set of rules or generalizations – which may be based on some surface realities and patterns – but which fail to account for real experience and individual variation. What's more, since we may feel threatened, the human mind can presume negative motives or draw negative inferences from the generalizations we create/observe, which forms the basis of prejudice.

THERE IS ALWAYS MORE VARIATION WITHIN GROUPS THAN BETWEEN THEM. What does that mean? That means that no matter how much we may perceive groups A and B as different, the amount of difference between those groups is dwarfed by the amount of variation within each group. In other words, both groups have shy people and daring people, honest and dishonest, bellicose and accommodating types, etc. Each group is much more of a mixed stew of types of people, and the patterns within each group are more alike than different. It's just that culture and history shape the customs and rituals through which those various aspects of human nature are expressed. Think of it this way: both Apple and Microsoft operating systems allow you to accomplish work with a word processing system. The work is the same, but the language, the coding, through which that basic work is accomplished or expressed, is different. This is why cross cultural communication takes work – we have

to go back and examine aspects of our own “operating systems” and understand the “systems” of others to be able to communicate between the two “platforms.”

For precisely the reason described above, OUR OWN CULTURAL IDENTITIES ARE NOT APPARENT TO US UNTIL WE INTERFACE WITH ANOTHER CULTURE.

Finally, CULTURES ARE ALWAYS CHANGING, ESPECIALLY AS THEY INTERFACE WITH ONE ANOTHER. Even from within, cultures move and flow and change through time, even when they think they don't. But the pace of change is accelerated when cultures – which reinforce different styles of communication and which accent different binding customs and values - interact with one another. The result is often disorienting (to say the least!), but inevitably, both cultures change in the process. Individuals who begin to bridge these gaps are like pioneers, blazing paths and creating plausible options for hybrid identities for others to copy and test out in the future.

2. HOT SPOTS IN CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but when working with other people, or traveling abroad for work or pleasure, it may pay to ask some experts about the following communication styles of the area you plan to visit. A little research at the outset can stave off a host of misunderstandings:

OPENING AND CLOSING CONVERSATIONS: Different cultures may have different customs around who addresses whom when and how, and who has the right, or even the duty, to speak first, or what is the proper way to conclude a conversation. Think about it: no matter where you are, some ways of commencing a conversation or concluding one will be considered as rude, even disrespectful. These are artificial customs, to a certain degree, and there is probably no universally right or wrong way to go about these things, short of behaviors that all cultures would likely consider to be vulgar or abusive. This general area includes modes of address, salutations, levels of deference to age or social position, acceptable ways to conclude gracefully and so on. Obviously, this will also dictate patterns of acceptable gender interactions from one culture to the next.

TAKING TURNS DURING CONVERSATIONS: In some cultures, it is more appropriate to take turns in an interactive way, and in others, it is

more important to listen thoroughly and without comment, without immediate response, lest a response be taken as a challenge or a humiliation, particularly depending on the context of the conversation, the audience, and the levels of personal knowledge/relationship between the two people interacting. For example, a Western couple or pair of executives may feel perfectly comfortable interacting in a give and take way in a public market, but if that public market is in a part of the world where such a public display of give and take is considered to be in bad taste, then they may be giving offense without ever realizing it.

INTERRUPTING: The same questions arise over the issue of interrupting. In some cultures, interruption, vocal, emotional expression, etc. are considered to be the accepted conversational style, particularly among those considered to be equals, or among men. Many people of Northern European or American extract might mistake this kind of conversation for argument and hostility, but that would be an error.

USE OF SILENCE: In some forms of communication, silence is to be expected before a response, as a sign of thoughtfulness and deference to the original speaker, yet at other times, silence may be experienced as a sign of hostility. In the West, twenty seconds of silence during a meeting is an extraordinarily long time, and people will feel uncomfortable with that. Someone invariably will break in to end the uncomfortable silence before twenty seconds pass. But the same customs surrounding silence are not universal.

APPROPRIATE TOPICS OF CONVERSATION: In some places, it is considered vulgar to speak openly about money, for example, let alone about the kinds of intimate family issues that commonly form the basis of afternoon television “talk” shows in the West. Travelers or business people should learn the customs that surround the making of deals, the transaction of commerce, and the degree to which details are specified in advance and enumerated in writing across cultures (not all places are as prone to hire lawyers and create detailed contracts as we are in the West).

USE OF HUMOR: In the West, we often try to build immediate rapport through humor, but of course, this is not universally seen to be appropriate in all contexts. The use of laughter can be experienced as a sign of disrespect by some, and so it is important to understand that this is another area where misunderstandings can easily occur.

KNOWING HOW MUCH TO SAY: In some places, less is definitely more, whereas in other places, it is more valued to wrap a rather small point up in a longer preamble, followed by an extended wrap-up. For Westerners, this can be maddening, as we tend to value speaking directly and to the point. Then again, there are clearly circumstances where

Westerners say too much and lose their ability to communicate well, depending on the context. Of course, patterns around presumed areas of deference based on age and social standing can influence how much is appropriate to say, depending on the context.

SEQUENCING OF ELEMENTS DURING CONVERSATION: At what point during a conversation – or an extended conversation or negotiation – is it appropriate to touch upon more sensitive issues? Or how soon in a conversation is it appropriate simply to ask for directions? Since all cultures develop customs through which sensitive issues can be addressed in a way that connotes respect to all involved, and since those systems all can differ, it is important to understand the influence that sequence has on effectiveness. For us in the West, think about the process of asking, or being asked out on a date (a very Western process and one whose customs can be very fluid indeed). The right question, asked in the right way, but asked too soon or too late, according to custom, can connote very different things to the listener, and highly influence subsequent behavior. Sequencing and timing do matter!

3. RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND FILMS

BOOK: "Achieving Success Through Social Capital: Tapping the Hidden Resources in Your Personal and Business Networks," by Wayne Baker, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2000.

I was wandering through the bookstore at my alma mater this past month when I attended the Wharton Health Care Business Conference, and found this book, published through the University of Michigan Business School Management Series. This is the thinking person's book on professional networking, giving you more than anecdotes or the kind of tips we are accustomed to seeing. Based on meaningful sociological research by one of the leaders in this field (the very term "social capital" is one you should become familiar with), one of the most helpful insights in the book is how much the variety of "entrepreneurial" networks help people thrive and succeed, and even remain more physically healthy. Not sure what I mean by that? Then get the book! (By the way, this bears repeating: I have, and my company has, no financial incentive to promote any of the books or films in any of these newsletters.)

FILMS: "Chicago," in wide release.

Last month's recommendation was a bit on the heavy side, and so this month I made a point to see "Chicago," expecting it to be light, and hoping it to be fun, though there was a part of me that somehow just dreaded seeing this movie. I can't explain why. . . call it an "allergy" to seeing musicals on film. But, I must say, it was very enjoyable, and the dancing was a treat to the eye – a nice overall entertainment. It has gotten, in my mind, too much attention as an Academy Award film, but then again. . . it doesn't stink. In fact, it was (for me) a bit better than just pretty good, if not what I would call "great." Still, I recommend it for what it is – lots of fun. You can read more reviews [here](#).

"The Quiet American," in select theaters.

Starring an international cast including Michael Caine, Brendan Fraser, and Do Thi Hai Yen, this film had been delayed for release in the U. S. because studio execs feared it would be seen as too anti-American at a time when. . . studio execs do not want to be seen as anti-American! Based on the controversial Graham Greene novel, which I confess I've never read, I did not find the film so much political as it was intensely personal and well acted among all the leads and the supporting cast. Like any good work of literature, the scenes, characters and situations are provocative, and one can have one's politics intact and supported by whatever one chooses to see in this film, it seems to me. And yet, on a more personal level, the characters struggle with who they are, what they believe, and to what or to whom they feel they owe their loyalties in a complex world, which to me proved very compelling to watch, politics aside. And so I recommend the movie, especially as this month's edition is devoted to cross-cultural communication. For more on the film, click [here](#).

4. CHUCKLES

Speaking of culture and communication, our own American office cultures have their own language, a sign of any distinctive culture. But as cultures are always changing, some of the phrases we've become accustomed to can be taken more than one way, as in the list below:

COMPETITIVE SALARY:

We remain competitive by paying less than our competitors.

JOIN OUR FAST-PACED COMPANY:

We have no time to train you.

CASUAL WORK ATMOSPHERE:

We don't pay enough to expect that you'll dress up-well, a couple of the real daring guys wear earrings.

MUST BE DEADLINE ORIENTED:

You'll be six months behind schedule on your first day.

SOME OVERTIME REQUIRED:

Some time each night and some time each weekend.

DUTIES WILL VARY:

Anyone in the office can boss you around.

MUST HAVE AN EYE FOR DETAIL:

We have no quality control.

CAREER-MINDED:

Female Applicants must be childless (and remain that way).

APPLY IN PERSON:

If you're old, fat or ugly you'll be told the position has been filled.

NO PHONE CALLS PLEASE:

We've filled the job, our call for resumes is just a legal formality.

SEEKING CANDIDATES WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF

EXPERIENCE: You'll need it to replace three people who just left.

PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS A MUST:

You're walking into a company in perpetual chaos.

REQUIRES TEAM LEADERSHIP SKILLS:

You'll have the responsibilities of a manager, without the pay or respect.

GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

Management communicates, you, figure out what they want and do.

I'M EXTREMELY ADEPT AT ALL MANNER OF OFFICE

ORGANIZATION: I've used Microsoft Office.

I'M HONEST, HARD-WORKING AND DEPENDABLE: I pilfer office supplies.

MY PERTINENT WORK EXPERIENCE INCLUDES:

I hope you don't ask me about all the McJobs I've had.

I TAKE PRIDE IN MY WORK:

I blame others for my mistakes.

I'M PERSONABLE:

I give lots of unsolicited personal advice to co- workers.

I'M EXTREMELY PROFESSIONAL:

I carry a Day-Timer.

I AM ADAPTABLE:

I've changed jobs a lot.

I AM ON THE GO:

I'm never at my desk.

5. BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Forthcoming Book:

ChangeRx: Prescriptions for Successful Change Planning and Implementation - A Practical Guide for Leaders, by A. J. Schuler, Psy. D.

Anticipated for publication in the Fall of 2003, "ChangeRx" will be the only practical guide of its kind to walk change leaders through the actual process of designing and implementing a successful change campaign. The book, designed and formatted as an easily accessible workbook, will be an ideal resource for students of management, executives and leaders of organizations large and small, both in the profit and non-profit sectors.

To be placed on the notification list - to learn right away when ChangeRx" will become available - simply email me at AJ@SchulerSolutions.com with the subject heading, "ChangeRx." By doing so, you will have the opportunity to purchase "ChangeRx" at 20% off the retail price. You will also be able to receive free sample text online once the content becomes available. Don't miss this chance to get in on a good thing - "ChangeRx" is destined to become a "cult classic" among leaders of change and required reading for the executive teams of large organizations under transition.

6. ABOUT DR. SCHULER

A. J. Schuler, Psy. D., an expert on leadership and organizational change, provides consulting services, keynote presentations and seminars for clients companies. His trademark is highly personalized service that leads to measurable increases in productivity, profit and growth.

Dr. Schuler, President of Schuler Solutions, Inc., has served diverse organizations in the private and public sectors, including The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sony Development, Nomura Securities and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, Dr. Schuler has successfully led the profitable growth of a dynamic, international consulting firm while serving as Operations Director, and has successfully coached over five hundred CEO's and corporate executives.

7. HOW TO SUBSCRIBE OR UNSUBSCRIBE

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“Make each day your masterpiece.” -- John Wooden

P.S. - Remember to send in your comments and successes, and to forward this newsletter to at least one friend. -- AJS :-]