

Being cross-culturally aware

Cross-cultural awareness is generally something that the world is getting better at, but we're still not good enough. If you're going to work in a foreign culture you need to be aware of the things that you do which could actually be a barrier to your mission. Things that may be acceptable in one culture may be utterly taboo in another. It wasn't until an African pastor told me, *'If the people in my church knew you drink alcohol, they would assume you are a sinner and wouldn't listen to your testimony'* that I realised I needed to be teetotal or risk undermining the entire reason for being there.

Some other examples of frequent cross-cultural issues include:

- Thailand is known as the land of smiles, but not all the smiles are friendly. So a Thai man who has just crashed into your car will smile to appease your anger, but if you're from the USA, his smile will annoy you even more because you think he should show regret.
- In many parts of the world it is considered an insult to give somebody something with your left hand because that's the one you use when going to the toilet.
- In some places you leave your shoes outside the building when you go in so as not to carry dirt in.
- In large parts of Africa what we think of as bribery may be socially acceptable but losing your temper is not.
- Exposing your legs or shoulders or making close physical contact in public may be considered wanton behaviour – unless it's two men holding hands.

You can find out about things like this quite easily these days by reading what travel guides say about the place you are going, searching online, or even better tracking down people who've worked there and can tell you about it from personal experience, but it is really important to get to know what you should not do in another culture.

These issues reveal fundamental differences in world view across cultures. We often see only the behaviours, but behind them are attitudes based on different ways of understanding how the world works, and if we do not appreciate why people think the way they do, we may be tempted to dismiss their different values as insignificant. Failure to understand the basic cultural differences may impede our success with the gospel. For example, you wouldn't want to tell a Buddhist 'You must be born again'. He's fed up with being born again – he wants to achieve Nirvana and get being reborn over with!

There are different ways of summarising basic differences between cultures. One is whether shame or guilt is more important in a society. In a guilt culture, it's more important to behave according to a given norm, so for example stealing may be considered wrong. But in a shame culture, it's not the stealing that's the problem, it's the shame the family will suffer if someone gets caught stealing. That's why Europeans may be quick to fire employees caught stealing, while others may try to find a more face-saving way of dealing with the issue. It's also why Pakistanis may not be able to

understand why British people think honour killing is wrong. For them, maintaining honour might be far more important than preserving a life.

Another model is the warm/cold culture distinction highlighted by Sarah Lanier in her book *Foreign to Familiar*. People living in cold climates tend to live indoors, so are more likely to value privacy and nuclear family, while those in warm climates probably spend most of their time out of doors and so value openness and community. Which is why Brits who go to live in Africa get upset when people look in the windows of their house to see what they're doing, and why Africans don't understand why the Brits are so angry about it!

Living in a culture which is fundamentally different to one's own will usually give rise to some emotional stress. You may find yourself getting increasingly frustrated, tearful or angry. These can be signs of culture shock. This can happen in a number of contexts but is generally caused by the fact that the little things we rely on in life to provide security or familiarity are no longer there. It could be as simple as not being able to get muesli for breakfast, or queuing patiently in the heat for a bus only to find everyone else pushes you out of the way when it arrives. Undiagnosed, culture shock can lead to a long-term disaffection with the society you're working in, even resentment and hostility, and may result in people coming back early and disillusioned, thinking they are not cut out for mission.

Recognising culture shock for what it is can be the first step to dealing with it. Recognising that you are who you are, and it's actually ok not to fit into somebody else's way of doing things is the second. Specific steps you can use to deal with it include spending time with people from your own culture (but not too much or you begin to isolate yourself), eating your favourite food if you can get it (ask friends to post you bars of chocolate for example) or immersing yourself in your own culture by using DVDs or CDs. One family I know minimised the culture shock their children suffered when they subscribed to cable TV which allowed them to watch British TV channels.

Given time, most cases of culture shock will pass and people are better equipped to engage with and delight in the culture they're serving. Some people are more adept at encountering new cultures than others, and this can depend on their personality, life experience, and the amount of travelling they've done. A simple test to find out how adaptable you are can be found on our website at <http://www.syzygy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Cultural-adaptability.pdf>. If it turns out you're not very adaptable, it doesn't mean you shouldn't go, it just tells you that you might have to work harder at certain things. And if you're very adaptable, it doesn't mean you're not going to suffer from culture shock.

Specific issues which are always cross-cultural hot topics include:

Language – if you do not take time to learn the language well, you will be limited in your ability to express the gospel coherently in a way that is culturally appropriate to the local people. You may inadvertently insult people, or give rise to damaging misconceptions about what Christians believe. You could easily do more harm than good. So please make sure that you take time to learn the language thoroughly.

Alcohol – In many countries, if you drink alcohol, it will identify you as an ungodly person. Rightly or wrongly, people will not take your message seriously. You may even cause significant offence. So

please find out from reliable local sources whether alcohol is seen as a bad thing in your host country, and be committed enough to your mission to become teetotal if necessary.

Clothing – while your choice of clothing may identify you as a foreigner, it may also give significant offence. Even if it's a warm country you should take care to dress as if you are doing business rather than on holiday. Ladies with bared shoulders or low necklines may be seen as immoral. Men who wear shorts when others wear smart trousers could be seen as disrespectful. Failure to remove your shoes on the right occasion could be insulting. We suggest that you make appropriate attempts to learn from how the locals dress, and dress like they do.

Finally, we recommend that you read John Miles' training manual *Worlds Apart* (<http://www.syzygy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/worlds-apart.pdf>), which was written for English people working in Africa, but contains many valuable examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings that will be relevant in a variety of contexts.