Cross-Cultural Skills: Essential for Expatriate Success

By Rudolph Young

The ability to work with others from different cultures is a key skill for academics with jobs outside their home countries, but it is a kind of competence that is rarely well defined. Neither is the path to attaining it.

Being an adept communicator is important in any job, but it is particularly so for expatriates. Although learning a language or spending time abroad may be a good start in improving intercultural communication skills, it is not enough.

Knowing the local language is not essential in every country, and learning languages like Arabic and Mandarin is not for the fainthearted. Learning a local language is less relevant when an expatriate is on a short-term contract or in countries such as Singapore or the United Arab Emirates, where English is widely spoken in the business and education worlds. Showing a willingness to learn the language may be more important than knowing the language. A mere greeting in someone else's language or the ability to say "thank you" or "you are welcome" projects respect, humility, and openness.

Effectively picking up on nonverbal cues is also an important part of getting to know how other cultures convey subtle messages. Gestures may mean completely different things in different countries, and blunders by the uninitiated may lead to much embarrassment all around. A simple "thumbs up" hand signal in one country may be a vulgar sign elsewhere. Similarly, what is a "zero" hand sign in France could be considered extremely offensive in Brazil. In some Asian cultures, a kissing sound is preferable to whistling to get a friend's attention. But Westerners are sometimes offended by the kissing sound, mistaking it for over-the-top flirting.

Cross-cultural competence also comes into play in management styles. Expatriates may
soon discover that participative management is not always the best method to use in their new setting. This difference is particularly profound in hierarchical societies, where asking for input in front of colleagues may be viewed with suspicion, and as a possible ploy to either catch people who don't know the right answer or setting them up to "lose face." I have seen South Asian employees suspect a manager of being incompetent when he asked for their suggestions.

I have also seen the opposite when a North American administrator attempted, without any consultation, to introduce a management solution based on "how we always do things at home." His efforts ended in resistance and failure. The expats who are able to navigate these cross-cultural minefields are the ones who can use their previous years of management experience and knowledge to understand the context they are working in. Then they craft a fit-for-purpose solution.

Upon arrival in their new country, expatriates are likely to go through all of the stages of culture shock described by scholars. Expats are initially excited with their new environment and fascinated by the host culture. They commonly make disapproving remarks about features of the new culture, make comparisons with their home culture, or sometimes even go overboard in their enthusiasm to adapt. For example, I heard of a Canadian school principal who wanted to dress in local Arab dress on his first day at school to show his commitment to his new cultural milieu. Fortunately colleagues warned him that his efforts at "going native" would not be appreciated.

After expatriates' initial excitement has subsided, they usually experience increasing antagonism toward their host culture and view the culture in their own moral terms. That may lead to depression or aggression toward the local people while the expat tries to reconnect more positively.

Finally, successful expats typically accept their new host culture and become less affected by the cultural differences. They become more comfortable dealing with unfamiliar situations and more tolerant of cultural habits that they may previously have been disturbed by. In the Middle East, for example, one will observe veteran male Western expats greeting their Arab colleagues with the familiar light slapping of the other person's hand before shaking hands rather than insisting on the typical Western handshake. On the other hand, the customs of rubbing of noses and male kissing of some Arab men is probably best left to the locals.

The typical pattern of culture shock goes like this: At first expats think the new culture is delightfully exotic, then it is wicked and silly, and finally, they think it is just dissimilar and diverse. Many expats report similar phases of adjustment to their home culture when they return.

Expats should become skilled at predicting when cross-cultural conflict will arise, and when it is best just to avoid it. The death of Osama bin Laden resulted in many emotional responses on an in-house blog at an institution in the Emirates, with lots of anti-American sentiment and anti-violence messages. It would be easy to be seduced into dysfunctional debates on these blog sites. Sometimes it is better to keep quiet, without feeling that one has let one's own political or cultural perspective down.
At a recent meeting with some South African legal advisers, one of the Arab hosts used a generally nonderogatory Arab word for nonbeliever, "kafir." The same word also has a highly racist connotation in South Africa. One of the legal advisers requested the Arab to kindly not use this word in his company. The atmosphere became tense, and the South Africans were not successful with their business pitch. When coaching expatriates, I have always appreciated the advice of the well-known graphic artist Mary Engelbreit: "If you don't like something, change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it."

The path to intercultural competence is not always clearly marked. It is easier to measure someone's technical skills or achievement in an academic discipline than to get a sense of how competent they are at working with those from other countries. But in the end, intercultural competence is major part of an academic expatriate's success.

Editor's note: This column is the second one in a series.

Rudolph Young holds an M.B.A. degree and a doctorate in organizational psychology. He works as the human-resources director for the Higher Colleges of Technology, the largest public higher-education institution in the United Arab Emirates. The views expressed here are his own and not that of his institution.