

THE CULTURE DIVIDEND

By Jack Keogh

Survival of the fittest

The globalization of business through the advances in technology is parallel to a whole new world of personal interconnectedness. The new interpersonal connectedness has come about through cheap air travel, T.V., global media, the internet, Voip, Skype, Blogging, Instant Messaging, Podcasts, Wikis, and etc. Little by little it seems that our micro-cultures (family, education, work, church, fashion, nation, sense of “what is cool”) are being slowly absorbed into a more diffuse global macro-culture. The pace of change is accelerating; it’s difficult and, sometimes, unsettling, to constantly have to adjust and adapt. It’s useful to remind ourselves that ‘survival of the fittest’ is all about our ability to adapt. So we don’t have too much choice.

To remain – or become - a productive and successful contributor in the global environment in which we now live and breathe means that we need updated skills to be able to understand the global phenomenon in terms of how we communicate with those who at first blush seem so different. We get to make choices. And, of course, all choices have consequences for better or worse. Where do we begin?

The skills that we need

Self awareness is always a good place to start. Just to become consciously aware of a new sense of a global, virtual community and the essence of our own “cultural” identity is a first step. “Culture” is not a subject that most of us are taught in school. To paraphrase Edward T. Hall the noted anthropologist, “Culture is invisible and often most invisible to those who live in it”. So, we need to be conscious of our own ‘taken for granted’ culture and learn to become open and non-judgemental towards others.

When we think about “cultural differences”, we more often than not are referring to the differences between people of different national cultures. However, it seems to me, that we would do well to take note of a situation a little closer to home. What about the fundamental cultural differences between men and women? (“Men are from Mars, Women from Venus”). And then there is the equally striking cultural difference between teenagers and their parents. Underlying both of these we have personality style differences – introverts and extroverts to mention but two categories. Hence a great place to acquire the cultural communication skills that we need in global business is right under our noses – communication with the opposite sex, with our teenagers and with people whose personality style differs from our own,

Generational Differences

Generational differences need to be added to the cultural mix. Each one has its own “hidden drivers” of deep culture.

The Baby Boomers and Generation Xers, got their experience in command and control type organizations. For them (me!), working hard, long hours and putting the business first is how they learned to succeed by creating value. The newer generations are different. For them, part of their “taken for granted” culture is technology. They also grew up with far more personal independence, in a more overtly global environment where they focus more on output than input. Just like the long summer vacations of the Europeans, the new Generations are actually living what my generation only dreamed of! They want to be measured on the quality of their work rather than the hours they put in or their prowess on the corporate ladder. They want to be mentored, not talked down to. When it comes to working, managing or selling across the generational divides, cross-cultural communication skills will pay big dividends. This is true, whether we run a small business, manage HR for a multinational or we are involved in direct sales in our local market.

Numbers from the US Census Bureau reinforce the need for updated skills.

According to the US Census Bureau, 2000, racial and ethnic diversity is increasing:

- ✓ **Baby boomers:** White (74%), Hispanic (10%) African/American (11%)
- ✓ **Mature:** White (81%), Hispanic (6%) African/American (9%)
- ✓ **Gen X:** White (66%), Hispanic (14%) African/American (14%)

Everything we say is influenced by our culture

Culture totally affects the way we communicate, even though, more often than not, as Hall points out it is hidden. We operate with a set of mostly invisible beliefs, values, and assumptions that become apparent to other people through our behavior. In the much used “iceberg model” of culture, “behavior” is what we see as the tip of the iceberg protruding above the water. Below the water, hidden, lie the “deep drivers” of our culture – what we believe value and take for granted as a group. These hidden drivers shape the behavior of a group which results in a “characteristic behavior”. To understand other cultures, we need to understand the values, beliefs and assumptions that drive our own “taken for granted” culture. If were ambassadors to a totally alien culture, how would we explain the values, beliefs and assumptions that shape our behavior as a group?

The culture dividend

Understanding more about culture can be a real bonus when working as part of any global organization.

Showing your customers and coworkers from

different generations, cultures or different countries that you are in tune with them, and that you appreciate and value the differences between you, can help get your working relationships off to a flying start.

Your spouse or significant other, your teenagers and those whose style is different from your own will benefit from your cross-cultural knowledge, your respect for the “differences” which make all of us unique.

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
tho' they come from the ends of the earth!

The Ballad of East and West, Rudyard Kipling

Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC incorporates global skills into specific programs, such as:

- ✓ Cross-cultural workshops for leaders, teams, Realtors and salespeople
- ✓ Transformational leadership development seminars
- ✓ Innovative pre-retirement preparation courses that gain employee good-will and improve recruitment and retention.
- ✓ Teambuilding and global mindset development

www.jackkeogh.com

<http://www.globalmindset.blogspot.com>