

Mind the gap.

Intercultural coach learns expat how to counter the cynics.

“It’s better to travel one mile than to read a thousand books” - Confucius

Introduction:

In the global village, managers wear the same brands, use the same laptop and even drink the same beer after work. Although we live and work thousands of miles apart, we seem to share the same corporate values and beliefs. But does this mean we can take the cultural environment for granted? The growing success of intercultural coaching proves that differences are here to stay. If companies want their expatriates to succeed, they ‘d better learn them to mind the cultural gap.

Body text:

Luc De Haes (www.yeo-management.com) has been training expatriates for years. The intercultural consultant thinks companies should not confuse comfort with preparation. Finding a luxurious dwelling for your manager is no guarantee for a successful mission. If you want your expatriate to succeed, you ‘d better teach him (*) to become a world citizen.

(*) when referring to the expatriate as he or him, we refer to both men and women.

Q: Most multinationals have been sending expatriates around the world for decades. One would suspect them to have discovered the secret of a successful foreign mission.

A: Of course they know when a mission is successful. When the project meets the targets, the job is done. If the expatriate comes home after 3 or 5 years with a broad smile, then things look even better. The problem is: a considerable number of expats come home a lot earlier, with a broken dream, sometimes even a broken marriage. Helping people to prevent such a personal disaster is not only the right thing to do from an ethical point of view. For a company, it is also a financially sound decision. When a foreign mission turns into a disaster, one should not only consider the costs made for the expat and his family members. What will it cost to get the project going again? And how comfortable will it be for a new expat to face the team of local employees? A failure is awfully expensive, so why do companies keep repeating the same mistake? Because they have not yet found the key to successful expatriation.

Q: You think you know how to be successful abroad?

A: Well, I think more energy should be put in the individual and his family, to get them into the right mood to face their new environment. Today, most expats get a lot of practical support to relocate. They get a beautiful house in a safe neighbourhood, a school for the children and a long list of useful addresses and phone numbers. All very helpful stuff, but these luxuries can create a misleading image of things to come. A lot of expats think they’ve got everything under control. Well, I’ve got a surprise

for them: this feeling of control is an illusion. Sooner or later you will face a wall you can't climb. Then the process of integration really starts.

Q: You can't blame companies who help their expats to live without strains in a new country.

A: Of course not. I'm just saying you should do more than tell them when the shops close and what the dominant religions are. A new culture is a complex, often disturbing phenomenon. People behave differently, become angry or laugh at you. Simply because you tend to forget they share a different view about basic things. A lot of people feel lost when they first experience this lack of understanding.

Q: Today, a lot of people travel extensively around the globe. In a few years, they have learned more about exotic cultures than their parents during a whole lifetime. Doesn't this make them better world citizens, with a better understanding of the Other?

Q: It is striking to see how people who have been great tourists, often turn out to be lousy expats. The reason is not that hard to find. Most people have a great time in travel, simply because they're in control. If they don't like the people they meet, they travel on. Although a trip to an exotic country may sound adventurous, you don't really take a lot of risks. In the worst case, you ruin your three weeks of holidays. Or you catch diarrhoea.

When you decide to leave for a mission abroad, things are quite different. You don't only risk your health; you risk your career and your love life. Expats often feel they really have to succeed. This puts an enormous amount of stress on their shoulders. There is this great ambition to be successful. This eagerness to get things started is often their greatest enemy.

Q: What do you mean?

A: In a normal working environment, we have a natural system to cope with change. If a new manager comes into the office, we mostly start by denying he's there. We wait to see if he really has an impact on our daily life. When he starts crossing our path, we counteract to test how far his influence will go. Through this interaction, we learn to know the guy better and we get more involved. If things go well, we end up becoming great colleagues, even friends.

When an expat leaves for a mission, he usually works the other way around. He is eager to give it his best, so he starts with an extremely positive state of mind. The country is great, the people are so hospitable. In a lot of cases, expats invest more time in getting to know the country and the people than they ever did in their home country. It's when they start working with local co-workers to meet the business goals that the troubles start. That's when the expat refuses to adapt. When he or she is unable to cope with this feeling of intercultural frustration, the process results in a total denial of the Other. That's when you hear statements like "We never should have got into this project", or, "It's hopeless, these people will never learn." If you don't counteract, you become the typical cynic you meet at the bar of any international hotel.

Q: What is the best cure against this cynicism? Reading a lot about the country and the local customs?

A: That's what a lot of people think. Unfortunately, this form of cultural typecasting often reinforces the cynicism. The guidebooks will support you in your view of "them being different". It leads your attention away from the big issue: you. You're the one who has a problem, not the member of the exotic culture you're about to encounter. You end up being even more isolated.

Q: What can we do to prevent this cynical isolation?

A: A cultural awareness training should teach you to draw the line between cultural and individual differences. This may sound abstract, but it isn't. When you meet new people in your own day-to-day environment, there are people you like and people you dislike. When you start liking a stranger, it means you share the same individual preferences and beliefs. When some people meet at a party, they immediately start talking about all kinds of topics, although they have never met before. It is their way to look for preferences or beliefs they have in common. Others have a different style. They'll start making jokes about the food or the drinks. When they discover they share the same kind of humour, they think it is time to talk about more serious things. Although these differences in communicative style are striking, you shouldn't confuse them with cultural differences. A cultural difference is due to values and beliefs that you would expect to be shared by all the members of the country you visit. It is the set of rules people learn to respect in school or at home. The problem with the "cynical expatriate" is that he "uses" all individual differences to prove it is useless to bridge the gap between both cultures. This is morally and intellectually unfair.

Q: A practical guideline would be: stay away from the cynics.

A: Absolutely. Stay away from the country clubs and the typical occasions where all the expats meet, unless you're strong enough to face the cynics. Try to meet as many local people as you can. Try to find those people in the foreign culture who share the same individual preferences. Do you like jazz or sailing? Well try to get in contact with locals who share your enthusiasm. It will help you to build great friendships. And they will help you to understand their culture.

Q: Can a person ever become a real world citizen?

A: It will take some years, but it certainly is possible. My whole work is based upon this firm belief. The world is a great place to live. If you want to, you can continue to discover new grounds. The most important thing you need, is the right state of mind. Don't try to run before you can walk. But always keep an open mind for things to come. Learn to appreciate the others for what they contribute. Don't think black or white. The truth is painted in shades of grey. Don't get obsessed by problems, just try to solve them. And most importantly, get to know yourself better. In the beginning, it can be hard to discover you're not the perfect human being you always thought you were. But once you learned to cope with your weaknesses, things only get better.