

NONPROFITS GOING GLOBAL...

LEADING THROUGH CULTURE CLASH

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

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Globalization is a fact of life. But I believe we have underestimated its fragility.

Kofi Annan

Globalization is a fact of life for corporations...and for nonprofits. Leading a non-profit is a challenging job, but leading a global non-profit adds another layer of complexity. In the twenty-first century transportation and communication systems get us around the world with incredible speed. The Internet gives us unparalleled access to information, pictures, and people. In spite of this, it is often culture that divides peoples. As the global walls come down, cultural walls remain, and may even be fortified.

This article will help non-profit leaders considering moving from a state or national focus to a global focus by addressing culture shock, identifying potential leadership barriers, and providing guidance on steps leaders and organizations can take in order to adapt to working in different cultures. The practical lessons learned by different people will help you navigate through the clash of cultures as you go global or move into a new culture.

Culture Shock

Corporations globalize for a variety of reasons, such as new market opportunities, resource acquisition, access to talent, and/or economies of scale. For non-profits, the motivation may be for some of the same reasons, but often it is to facilitate fulfilling a humanitarian mission. For example, Habitat for Humanity seeks to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness, Food for the Hungry focuses on disaster and emergency relief, and World Vision is dedicated to helping people overcome poverty and injustice. While corporations and non-profits may encounter different challenges when moving into a new country, one thing is consistent...the potential for culture shock.

Morgan W. McCall, Jr. and George P. Hollenbeck, in their book, Developing Global Executives, define the term "culture shock" as "the surprise and anxiety that we experience as a result of a loss of identity when we are immersed in a different culture." In their study of global executives, they found that the surprise generally fell into one of two types. The first evolved

around the leader having “incorrect assumptions about other people’s values, motivation, willingness to be candid, or lifestyle.” The second type of surprise resulted from the leader’s actions—be it style or behavior—that were different, even opposite, from the other culture. Both types of surprise resulted in a disconnect between the leader and people in the other culture.

Here is a specific case in point. Don Brewster was an executive pastor in a mega-church located in Northern California when he felt God’s call to move to Cambodia in 2005 to start the Agape Restoration Center (www.aim4Asia.org), under the non-profit umbrella of Agape International Missions. The Center provides long-term aftercare for young girls rescued from sexual exploitation and slavery. Agape’s mission is to end “this travesty against children and restoring hope to their broken lives and [giving] hope to the future of the people of Cambodia.”

Brewster prepared for the project by making a couple of trips to Cambodia, each more than two weeks long, to jumpstart the project and learn about the culture. He spent time with people who had been in Cambodia for three or more years. He also did considerable reading to understand the history and culture of the people. He began to learn the language.

In spite of this, he still encountered cultural shock. “Clear and accurate translations/interpretations,” shared Brewster, “does not necessarily result in clear and accurate communication.” The result is miscommunication, making relationships more challenging, and causing frustration on both sides.

Dr. Thomas Zweifel, in his book Culture Clash, asserts that while people in different cultures may look and dress differently, have different tastes, and think about different things, they fundamentally think differently. People in Asian cultures, for example, have a more holistically way of thinking, as compared to a linear pattern of thought that characterizes Americans.

Beyond culture shock, there are a variety of barriers when moving into a new culture.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers take many forms. Loyalty to one’s supervisor, for example, is highly valued in the Japanese culture, according to CountryReports.org. Brewster found this to be true in Cambodia. “The inability of national staff to say, ‘No’ to me even when I was wrong was a barrier,” said Brewster. “Time and perseverance has helped me work through this issue,” he added. In Brewster’s case, he asked for input from people who knew the culture, but they knowingly let him make mistakes because they were being loyal and, as employees, feared causing him to lose face. Now, some three years later, staff is more direct and open in their communication with him.

Another barrier Brewster encountered was simply the power of cultural beliefs. “The power culture has to stand against science, logic, etc. Most amazing to me was the power culture has...[over] even the most devoted and disciplined of persons.” Cultural beliefs are the result of such factors as national history, religion, literacy, folk lore, and disease.

Zweifel identified ten costly “sins” people make when operating in a different culture. These “sins” contribute to a clash in cultures.

1. You think the world plays by your rules.
2. You do what you always did in the past.
3. You take English for granted.
4. You don’t respect the cultural pathways for making things happen.
5. You don’t stand in your host’s shoes.
6. You forget to invest in relationships.
7. You jump from vision to action.
8. You take the village by storm.
9. You select the wrong people.
10. You forget that your advice is noise in their ears.

Each of these “sins” can become a barrier that can impede progress or undermine the entire effort...however well intended. The following anonymous quote conveys some wise advice:

There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow men —
true nobility is being superior to your former self.

Realize also that those in the country to whom you want to serve may place barriers in your way. They may have their own “sins” that make your task more difficult.

What is a leader or non-profit to do to survive in a new culture? The next section will provide some practical advice.

Adapting for Success

Success in a new culture is dependent on both the leader and non-profit organization. What can we learn from others who work in a different culture? What should non-profit organizations consider when contemplating going global?

As a result of his experience in Cambodia, Brewster learned these additional lessons about working with people in other cultures: Fear is powerful and impacts their behavior, such as fear of the boss or fear of losing face. Time is another factor. It takes considerable time to build relationships in order to understand and work within the culture and try to get beyond the fears.

Jean Baptiste Kamate is a Country Director for World Vision’s in Rwanda. Previously, he was responsible for World Vision’s efforts in his home country of Mali and two others in West Africa; Niger and Ghana. Kamate shared these three lessons for being successful when interacting with people in other countries: “Celebrate differences, demonstrate active listening skills (humility), and [understand that] strong human relationships open the hardest doors.” He offered this sage advice, “Local people know a lot we do not know. We are not experts; we are learners.” Such an approach exhibits respect for others and a willingness to learn.

Lorin Staats works for the Jian Hua Foundation (JHF) in China. Jian Hua means “build China” in Chinese. Though JHF is a not-for-profit organization, the lessons Staats has learned are still relevant. Similar to Kamate, Staats said, “Lesson one is to approach the relationship as a learner...This desire to better understand the people, and their culture and land goes a long way.” Staats found these additional lessons important to be successful: Humble thyself...you don’t have all the answers; be flexible and willing to see and do things in different ways; and, be ready to laugh at yourself and with nationals, as they laugh at you.

When preparing to go into a new culture, Staats recommends finding a cultural mentor. “This has been essential for me in connecting with the culture and its people,” said Staats.

At the organizational level, as organizations move into different cultures, Rosabeth Moss Kanter in “Transforming Giants,” published in the Harvard Business Review (January 2008), says, “Values turn out to be the key ingredient in the most vibrant and successful of today’s multinationals...once people agree on what they respect and aspire to, they can make decisions independently and not work at cross-purposes.”

Although Kanter’s work focused on multi-national corporations, the principle rings true for non-profits. Non-profit values set the context for those working in different countries, allowing them to adapt those values to the context of the local culture. On this point, Kanter commented, “...a foundation of values and standards provides a well-understood, widely communicated guidance system that ensures effective operations while enabling people to make decisions appropriate to the local situation.”

Values can serve as a “guidance system” to keep people in different countries moving in the right direction. They also provide a context within which to make decisions as challenges arise.

World Vision’s vision, mission, and values (listed below) provide guidance to leaders, like Kamate, who operate in more than 100 countries.

World Vision’s Vision, Mission, and Values

Vision: Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world’s most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

Mission: World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice, and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Core values: We are Christian; We are committed to the poor; We value people; We are stewards; We are partners; and We are responsive.

It is important to remember that the decision to go global changes the organization's strategy. Jay Galbraith in his book, Designing Organizations, recommends using the Star Model when changing aspects of an organization. The Star Model is comprised of five inter-related dimensions: strategy, structure, people, processes, and rewards.

The decision to move into another country represents a change in strategy. Would moving into another country change the structure of the non-profit? Yes. Does moving into another country change aspects about who is hired, how they are trained, and HR policies and practices? Yes. Will the vertical or horizontal processes change relative to decision-making or providing service? Probably. Will the rewards that are needed to help motivate people to support a new structure, new HR practices, or new processes need to change? Maybe. The key to the Star Model is recognizing that when dimensions of the organization change, especially the strategy, the other dimensions may need to be realigned.

When leaders and other staff move into a new culture, there are new challenges requiring different skills. McCall and Hollenbeck provide a model for developing global leaders. It involves identifying talented people and providing them with appropriate experiences to produce the right talent. For the process to work, there need to be mechanisms in place to get executives into the right experiences, catalysts to facilitate learning, and ongoing support to the individual. The complexity of the model is determined by a variety of factors, such as the background of selected staff, nature and location of the work, and organizational policies and practices.

Success in a new culture requires lessons be learned at the individual and organizational level.

Conclusion

It is a wonderful thing for non-profits to extend their vision and services into a new country...perhaps to help the poor or diseased, or like the Agape Restoration Center to help girls recover from sexual exploitation. The opportunities are boundless. However, be ready for a cultural shock, avoid creating barriers, figure out how to overcome barriers in the new culture, and make organizational adjustments to support a change in strategy.

The words of Mother Teresa and Winston Churchill sum it up well...

God doesn't require us to succeed; he only requires that you try.
I do not pray for success, I ask for faithfulness.
Mother Teresa

Never, never, never, never give up.
Winston Churchill

Bio

Dr. Merlin Switzer works exclusively in the field of leadership. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with an emphasis in Leadership Coaching. Dr. Switzer is a leadership coach, consultant, trainer, and conference speaker. He has worked with numerous leaders and organizations across the U.S. to help leaders be more effective. More recently, he has worked with leaders in Ecuador and Cambodia.

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