

The Art of Crossing Culture

Source: A summary of *The Art of Crossing Culture*, by Craig Storti, Intercultural Press, Maine, 1990. Compiled by Mark Tittley in August 2000.

Most people want to adapt to a new culture they find themselves in, but most don't. Cultural Adaptation is a phrase that refers to the process of learning the new culture and its behaviours and language in an effort to understand and empathise with the people of the culture and to live and interact successfully with them.

For sure, it is disconcerting to be at the top of your form one moment, and all thumbs the next.

When one undertakes a move abroad one experiences the following challenges: surviving the move; adjusting to a new job or ministry; adjusting to the new community; adjusting to a new climate; adjusting to poorer communications; adjusting to poor transportation; adjusting to having to do without the things you enjoyed back home; adjusting to not knowing anyone – the result of these experiences is culture shock. These things consume our time and energy and mean that you spend most of your time trying to cope.

What will help you cope in a new country? There are a number of items which will help with this level of adaptation: (1) Know that these stresses are coming; (2) Understand your feelings and anxieties are normal; (3) Keep things in perspective by realising that the trials you are facing are not life threatening; (4) Try to be precise about what it is that is the source of frustration – chances are it is an old dilemma in a new packaging; (5) Take specific actions: look after your health; keep in touch with people back home; seek out other people; and be patient.

However, adjusting to a new country is not the same thing as adjusting to a new culture. The country is a physical circumstance – the setting in which culture is lived out. The culture is the people and how they behave – not general behaviour but behaviour that is specific to a group of people. There are ways in which all people are alike – as human beings we share similar behaviours. Then on the other extreme there are ways in which each person is unique from all others. In the middle there is culture – where one groups acts oddly in the eyes of another.

There are two kinds of adjustments that need to be made (each result in cultural incidents): **Type I** is adjusting to behaviour on behalf of the local people which annoys, confuses or unsettles us. This is where the behaviour of the natives gives the foreigner cause for concern. **Type II** is adjusting our own behaviour so that it does not annoy, confuse or unsettle the local people. This is where the behaviour of the foreigner gives the natives cause for concern.

A cultural incident causes the following feelings to arise: confusion; helplessness, fear, anger, frustration, embarrassment and anxiety. A once off incident is endurable but dealing with these feelings in a string of events is really tough. It is understandable that people who experience stress and anxiety in a cross-cultural situation will want to avoid or withdraw. Here is what happens (this works for other Type I and Type II adjustments):

1. A cultural *incident* occurs

2. causing a *reaction* (anger, fear, etc)
3. which prompts us to *withdraw*

Successful cultural adjustment consists of learning how to recognise and check the impulse to withdraw and how to transcend it.

As people withdraw some seek the company of other expatriates – this can be a temporary phase, or it can become a permanent home. Some withdrawal into an expatriate enclave is appropriate but this reaction to the local culture does not go unnoticed by its inhabitants and it often provokes a counter-reaction of its own. The natives are aware of this behaviour and they notice that the foreigners keep their distance and socialise largely with other foreigners.

What happens when a cultural incident occurs? We may feel uneasy, not understanding what is happening or what we should do next. Unsure of what to do and anxious to do something we become agitated. This occurs because what we **expect** to happen does not happen. Each of us expects that everyone else is just like us. We expect everyone to behave like we do (this is the source of Type I incidents) and we assume we behave like everyone else (the course of Type II incidents).

Returning to, and refining, the model introduced above, the following happens:

1. We expect others to be like us but they aren't
2. Thus, a cultural *incident* occurs
3. causing a *reaction* (anger, fear, etc)
4. which prompts us to *withdraw*

Our assumptions are natural – we learn how to behave by watching and imitating other (this is called conditioning). So we expect that others will act like we do. We can't think of what behaviours unlike ours would look like. We cannot put our selves in the shoes of others. Most of culture is hidden and outside of voluntary control – so it is difficult if not impossible to control.

Many people confuse familiarity with cultural diversity with the ability to adjust to another culture. But just because someone knows about a foreign culture does not mean that they will achieve adjustment. Many sojourners educate themselves about the country they are going to – they read all they can, talk to people who live there, and participate in some kind of training or orientation. They assume they are prepared for the experience but they still experience culture shock.

Conditioning is both the problem and the solution. Just as we learn through experience, to expect everyone will behave as we do, so we can learn through experience to expect certain people to behave differently. We must allow ourselves to have the experiences that will bring about change in our expectations.

It is not the actions of foreigners that worry us, but the fact that we aren't expecting particular behaviours in particular situations and we don't know how to respond. We don't know these behaviours because our conditioning has taught us that others behave like we do. When we discover differences we want to withdraw and avoid the culture around us. Some withdraw and go home while some stay and join an expatriate culture. Neither have adapted successfully.

We cannot expect natives to change their behaviour to suit our expectations; rather we must change our expectations to suit their behaviour – as guests we can't expect that our hosts adjust to us. The key is to train ourselves to become aware of feelings as they arrive and identify them for what they are – a response because what we expect does not happen. This will help to reduce our anger or frustration. If we can be aware of this, our shock will subside – and now we can experience the situation we find ourselves in. The goal is to create an interlude in which we reflect on what we are observing around us.

The model now means that there are two options at point 4:

1. We expect others to be like us but they aren't
2. so a cultural *incident* occurs
3. causing a *reaction* (anger, fear, etc)
4. which prompts us to *withdraw*, OR become *aware* of our reaction
5. if aware, we can *reflect* on it's cause
6. our reaction *subsides*
7. we *observe* the situation
8. which results in developing culturally appropriate *expectations*

Awareness is difficult because it runs against a lifetime of conditioning and instinct. At first we must deal with retrospective awareness. In time we may experience simultaneous awareness of our emotions. But what about behaviours that provoke us even after we have conditioned ourselves to expect them? Observation is effective where behaviours are neutral – but what about instances where a value we host has been violated or ignored? In these instances only observation coupled with understanding can prevent us from being offended. In some cases, cultural knowledge is needed before we can adjust to a specific behaviour. Knowledge won't stop us from reacting to the natives but can help us not to judge them inappropriately – and it can support our progress toward adjustment.

When we make a judgment we must remember that it is based on the experience of our own culture – this realisation can help us suspend our judgment and look for an explanation for the offensive behaviour. Where we still can't accept behaviour it is because they violate values so fundamental to our identity that our continued self-respect demands we reject them. Awareness and observation and understanding may not be enough. What then?

We must not expect to like everything about another culture, any more than we approve of everything about own. Adjustment must not be purchased at the expense of our own self-respect. If we are not at ease with ourselves we can't try to be at ease with the other culture. There will always be some behaviours that we will never get used to. People (foreigners and the natives) come by offensive habits honestly. This realisation allows us to separate individuals from their actions, to deplore the deeds and still have compassion for the doers.

With Type II situations how do we stop causing offence? We can't expect local people to tell us when we have done wrong. When a native gives feedback it often goes unrewarded – as expressing disfavour may be wrong in that culture and the feedback not well received. Many cultures prefer to send criticism through a third-party and not directly.

Some people ask to be guided on how to act in situations, but this does not go far enough. The do's and don'ts approach is situational – and it is impossible to anticipate all situations and prescribe

appropriate responses for each possible situation. It tends to overly simplify a complex phenomenon. Natives struggle to prescribe behaviour – we can't generalise from the advice of one or two. Different age groups; educational levels; socio-economic levels will have different behaviours. It is best to keep applying the technique of awareness – as we learn from locals by observation we will learn how to behave. We must learn the skill of 'instinct override' – the ability to look and then look again before acting. The key rule is to always err on the side of caution. But if we are too cautious and sacrifice naturalness and spontaneity on the altar of cultural correctness we won't have a good time or be invited back.

Objectively observing the culture around us and learning from it is key, but it is incomplete. Humans are not natural at objective observation. When we observe, we respond to the content of what we see – our response colours all subsequent observations. Unless this subjective element can be interrupted, true objective observation is beyond our reach.

Our goal is to be aware of our emotional state and to cut off our responses to the culture outside ourselves and create an interlude where we can truly see what we are observing.

In life we do not adapt naturally to different circumstances, but in a new culture the scale is much greater. The difference is like meeting one new person or a whole room full of people. There are also behaviours that local people exhibit that we are not capable of seeing. When we see things we do so according to meaning in our own culture. Also there is behaviour we see quite quickly but which does not mean the same in both cultures – behaviours we misinterpret – here we can discover our mistake by checking the content to see if it is consistent with our conclusions.

There is also a problem with seeing what isn't there – ie. something means something in my culture but nothing in the other culture.

We often over adjust – going native is inappropriate and is not genuine adjustment. Here the visitor replaces their culture with the local one. Generally the visitor has not been there long enough to justify doing this.

Cultural adjustment actually happens much more than we realise it. There is one culture at work and another at home – so we already have some skills that are needed to enter a new culture in another country.

Speaking the language is not essential to successful cultural adjustment but it does help the process. There are a number of benefits: (a) a sense of well-being and security; (b) it brings insights into the culture; and (c) it expresses worth to the natives.

Successful adjustment has the following rewards: (a) foreigners become increasingly effective in their work; (b) natives battle to hide behind their culture when foreigners understand it; (c) as we understand the locals we experience a sense of security; (d) after the period of uncertainty, we gradually become ourselves again; (e) natives become themselves, especially around us; (f) we start to identify people as individuals, and develop personal relationships; (g) we learn more about our own culture; (h) we begin to see what we could not see before – we become more self-aware which leads to self-improvement; (i) we are rescued from mistakes – such as putting down natives; inflated opinions of ourselves; regret over missed opportunities and a retreat from reality.

What about re-entry? We can construct a home in the new culture but we can't expect to have a home waiting for us when we return. We must create a home again. As we return there are difficulties adjusting back in our own culture; there will be things that we miss about the other culture; we miss the stimulation of living abroad; we struggle with people who do not want to hear about our overseas experiences. What will help with re-entry? (a) we must be forewarned about the realities of re-entry; (b) we must remind ourselves that all transitions are unsettling; (c) we should know that there is nothing wrong with us; (d) we should recall the early weeks in the foreign culture – we made it then and can make it again; (e) we must practise the same awareness process back home.