



About Stereotypes...

... in preparation of Cross-Cultural Seminars

The issue of generalisation or stereotyping is one that can arise in cross-cultural training. As we only have a short session, and would like to move onto the practicalities of how to improve one's negotiation skills across cultures, I have put together a few observations on this issue for you to look at in advance.

During a session, the trainer may of necessity be generalising about the cultural characteristics of the nationalities discussed. It is not possible to talk about culture without doing this, as we are discussing the behaviour and values of *groups* of people, not individuals - passed on at a collective level from generation to generation. The study of cultures is a social science, and - as Aristotle points out three times in the introduction to his Ethics - in the social sciences, accuracy is not the same as in the physical sciences. One has to use phrases such as 'in general....', or 'this tends to be the case...'

Generalisation can be absurd, but...

Of course, we have to be as accurate as possible, but prepared to modify our approach quickly if our counterpart does not correspond individually to the generalisation. Pushed too far, any generalisation becomes absurd, but it can be a good starting-point from which to go deeper. We also need to be careful to think descriptively, not evaluatively: for instance, we can say 'Italians tend to talk a lot', but not 'Italians talk too much'.

The process we may do well to follow - as with other models and approaches to adapting behaviour - is to:

- a) make a hypothesis
- b) weigh it against any confirming and disconfirming evidence
- c) act accordingly

Generalisations - or stereotypes - come from a mixture of facts, experience and history. They can seem too simple at first. The key is to get inside them and analyse them in their full complexity. German directness may be perceived as rudeness by the Japanese, for instance. But trying to understand why Germans are direct can help diffuse the emotion that directness may have on a more indirect culture, leading ultimately to a more clear-headed cross-cultural encounter, less influenced by false assumptions.

Again, we sometimes avoid generalising because we believe it may upset others. But that makes the assumption that we know what people judge as positive or negative qualities - for example, modesty tends to be a virtue in the Nordic countries, but may give a rather negative impression in cultures where self-assertion is seen as a positive quality.

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Few would deny that they have mental pictures of national behaviour, even if they avoid expressing them. A test is to describe a culture in diametrically-opposed terms to the common view. For instance, if one described Germans as 'tending to be unreliable, unpunctual, indirect, economical with the truth and untrustworthy', it would be very hard to agree with this description, wouldn't it? So, how would you describe them?

Differentiate between a nation and an individual

Finally, people sometimes object to generalisations because they question applying general characteristics to one individual. 'I met a very reserved Italian' they may say, or 'a rude and confrontational Japanese'. Quite right. But it can be even more dangerous to apply your experience of one individual to the whole nation – i.e. 'Because I met a rude and confrontational Japanese, my opinion is that the Japanese are rude and confrontational...'

I would urge you to come to the session with an open mind, but prepared to suspend disbelief in order to benefit from the usefulness of non-judgemental cultural generalisations. Encountering another culture and respecting rather than denying its differences from our own culture can be an enriching learning experience.

Finally remember – as Schopenhauer pointed out – that one of the greatest intellectual challenges is to understand that a thing can be both true and untrue at the same time.

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