



NEWSLETTER

Dear SIETAR members and friends,

This month we bring you some thoughts on the "self" starting with an article from our president, Sunita Nichani, who moderated an intercultural workshop for one of our institutional partners- the Indo French Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It is indeed heartwarming that intercultural themes are generating interest in such forums and we look forward to working with other institutional partners in the days to come.

EDITORIALS & USEFUL LINKS

Article: Just Be Yourself by Sunita Nichani

At a recent discussion on the topic of "Building Trust Across Cultures," my C suite panelists shared some of their insights about what had worked for them in the course of their long and successful careers spanning different cultures. All the panelists highlighted the importance of "being yourself" as being key to building trust across cultures. However, as the interculturalist moderating the discussion, it was interesting to observe how this valuable insight can very easily be misconstrued as a license to continue to behave as one does when in one's cultural comfort zone. So what exactly is meant by "Being yourself" in a cross-cultural environment?

It means neither mindlessly defending your own way, nor mindlessly capitulating to another way, "but rather being one's BEST self – a mindful and creative presence," to quote Heather Robinson, who introduced me and the SIETAR India Board to Personal Leadership.

So who is our "best self?" Our best self is self-aware: To be oneself, global leaders need to be self-aware and take cognizance of their cultural filters, value systems and their personal convictions in order to act with integrity, which is a core ingredient for building trust. I attended a recent talk on the Upanishads (ancient Hindu scriptures) and I came across this beautiful nugget of wisdom on the different stages of truth that relates directly to intercultural competence:

- Tell yourself the truth about you
- Tell yourself the truth about others
- Tell others the truth about you

Tell yourself the truth about you

In the context of building trust across cultures, this tenet is very valid as illustrated by the case of John, a US national who had just relocated to Bangalore as VP of a multinational firm. John mentioned to me in the course of our training session that he had trouble trusting one of his Indian colleagues, Rajesh. The trouble started when Rajesh warned John against leaving confidential information unlocked in his office, giving his Indian secretary access to documents such as appraisal reports etc. During the course of our conversation, John told me that he felt outraged by Rajesh's attitude of not trusting others (John's Indian secretary) despite not having any concrete proof of their untrustworthiness. Becoming aware of his own core value that people must be treated as innocent till proven guilty helped John understand his own emotional reaction to Rajesh better and to be open to a new way of considering the situation which leads us to the next stage of truth.

Tell yourself the truth about others

John had gone further to say that perhaps the reason why Rajesh didn't seem to trust the secretary was that in India, it is quite customary for hierarchical superiors to be condescending vis-à-vis their subordinates. How much of this cultural stereotype actually did apply to Rajesh? John understood the necessity of withholding judgment till he actually had proof, since this was tied to his core value of treating people as innocent till proven guilty.

Tell others the truth about you

One of my panelists pointed out the importance of being knowledgeable and articulate about one's culture in building trust with foreign counterparts. Expatriates often look for reliable sources of information and cultural mentors to guide them in a new environment and a local professional who has the technical competence, self-awareness and the cultural fluency to speak in an unbiased way and with accuracy about his/her culture often becomes a trustworthy working partner. What if, in our example, Rajesh had been able to explain that it is considered socially responsible behavior in India for individuals to take the necessary precautions so that they didn't create situations where they would need to blame the other?

What does "just be yourself" not mean?

Not becoming defensive: "Why should I learn to eat with forks and knives as they do?" "Why should I learn to speak in their language?" The list goes on and on. However, this can very easily become a trap and an excuse to not venture out of one's comfort zone. Trust is built when there is common ground. Speaking or mastering a foreign language is a hugely enriching experience provided it is not done at the expense of one's own language. In fact, engaging with other cultures gives one a deeper appreciation of one's own culture and one's personal value system. I leave the last word to Gandhi: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Useful Link: Reaching Across Cultures Without Losing Yourself from Jill Sheldekar

How do we operate effectively in a new culture without losing one's self or one's own cultural identity? I like to think about it in terms of negotiable values and non-negotiable values. Here is another approach presented by Andy Molinsky who's book was the topic of an HBR video: <http://hbr.org/video/2363497345001/reaching-across-cultures-without-losing-yourself> (click the link)

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