

# Seven Lessons in Intercultural Communications

“We learn from experience that not everything which is incredible is untrue.” - Cardinal de Retz

There's every chance you'll emerge from any intercultural awareness exercise or other experience a bit rattled, humbled, and perhaps even taken aback by the workings and power of culture. And a good thing that is, too, for the central message here, after all, is that in dealing with people unlike us, we can't afford to be too sure of ourselves. This general truth can be subdivided into several lesser ones, pieces of practical advice to keep in mind when communicating across cultures. We offer these seven lessons as a kind of summing up of the notion that is at the heart of this book and is likewise the key to successful intercultural communication.

## Lesson One

Don't assume sameness. We all do it all the time, of course. In deed, we have to or it would be hard to function in the world. Nevertheless, when you go abroad or meet people from abroad, try to entertain the notion that they might be very different from you. If it turns out they aren't, all the better; and if it turns out they are, score one for your side.

## Lesson Two

What you think of as normal or human behavior may only be cultural. A lot of behavior is universal, of course, and doesn't differ from country to country. But not all. Before you project your norms onto the human race, consider that you might be wrong.

## Lesson Three

Familiar behaviors may have different meanings. The same behavior saying yes, for example, can exist in different cultures and not mean the same thing. Just because you've recognized a given behavior, don't assume you have therefore understood it.

## Lesson Four

Don't assume that what you meant is what was understood. You can be sure of what you mean when you say something, but you can't be sure how this is understood by someone else. Check for signs that the other person did or did not understand you.

## Lesson Five

Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant. You are obliged to hear what others say through the medium of your own experience. You know what those words normally mean, but whose norms are we following here: yours or the foreigner's? If they're the foreigner's, do you know what they are?

## Lesson Six

You don't have to like or accept "different" behavior, but you should try to understand where it comes from. You may never get used to some of the things foreigners do (even as they are occasionally put off by you), but it can't hurt to try to figure out why they behave in such irritating ways. Once you realize, for example, that the reason Hispanics use go between is because they don't want to hurt your feelings, you may be able to make your peace with that behavior. Or at least you may not react so strongly to it. In other cases, even when you know the cultural explanation for a certain behavior, you may still not like it. Fine. But what have you lost by trying to understand?

## Lesson Seven

Most people do behave rationally; you just have to discover the rationale. Foreigners aren't acting this way just to get your goat. This is really how they are. They come by their crazy norms the same way you come by yours: through the

process of cultural conditioning. You may not think much of a particular bit of irritating behavior, but can you really say it isn't legitimate?

This, then, is our story: even though we know better, we all look around us and see not other people, but ourselves. And while we accept, intellectually, that others especially foreigners, can't possibly be like us, we behave for all the world as if they were. Oddly enough, our experience of the world doesn't always change our understanding of it; that is, our deeply felt notion of how things must be often prevails over our experience of how things are.

In time, however, through simulations, discussions, and reflection we can begin to change our view of ourselves and the world and come to believe that they are not one and the same. Once we have done that, we will truly be citizens of the world.

Adapted from *Figuring Foreigners Out* by Craig Storti.