

# Mutiny on the Bounty

*By George F. Simons*

When the *H.M.S. Bounty* sailed into the waters of Tahiti, one of the most history's famous culture shock dramas began to unfurl. Today it is hard to imagine the impact of this event on the players. The story of the *Bounty* in literature and cinema largely centers on the "guests," the British officers and crew, not the "hosts," the people of the island. The extreme nature of the seamen's culture shock is easy to see in this story. Brought up in a rigid Protestant ethic that stressed hard work, prudery and a rigid code of behavior, the seamen were totally "blown away" by an environment in which food could be gathered from the trees à volonté and by a population whose sexual mores that seemed completely unrestrained to the guests. The crew of the *Bounty* could hold up in the face of such bounty. We are not surprised that so many "went native."

## *Captain Bligh, Mr. Christian and the crew—the Personal Story*

When we find ourselves immersed in a new culture, it is not uncommon for sides of us to go to war with each other. One part of us, like Captain Bligh, wants to maintain the purpose and stability of our own cultural beliefs, values and behaviors and is often very rigid. Another part, like Mr. Christian, seeks to find a working accommodation between our past and our present and is often confused. A third part of us, like the crew, may take the occasion to cut free from the less desirable features of our own culture and is often unbridled.

Reading or viewing the story of the *Bounty* and honestly looking at our reactions to the various characters may reveal to us where our inclinations lie. Viewing and discussing a film of the story can serve as a useful tool in both expatriation and intercultural training. The latest version simply called *The Bounty* seems to have more of a sense of culture though movie buffs may prefer the acting in the 1933 and 1935 films.

A number of authors have described the stages of culture shock. Rarely do these stages occur at the same time, for the same duration and in the same order for individuals. Most of us tend after our early reactions to be Bligh, Christian or the crew. Sometimes we are rigidly trying to preserve who we are in the face of overwhelming pressure, sometimes we are successful at a degree of accommodation, sometimes we abandon all moorings and drift on the cultural seas upon which we find ourselves. Most of the time, we go through cycles of all three reactions again and again. Those who acculturate to a new environment successfully are usually people who have recognized and learned to manage these threefold patterns of reaction within themselves.

## *Paying Attention to the Bounty Factor*

This story is a powerful reminder of a factor which is rarely addressed in intercultural work and in particular the preparation of individuals for working in other cultural environments, namely the "bounty" of the new culture. Most of the time we are concerned with how not to offend, how not to break the rules of the new culture, how to reshape what we want to say and do so that our hosts will receive and will respond to it appropriately. Little attention is paid to what the new culture offers us in the way of opportunity and possibility that we did not possess in our own home culture, and, as the story shows us, this can be more disastrous and demoralizing than flouting the rules of the host culture if we are not prepared for it. Even less attention is paid to the bounty that the organization itself might reap from successful acculturation.

Mutiny on the *Bounty* is not the story of a successful acculturation to a new working environment. History tells us that the mutineers ultimately sailed off to Pitcairn's island and settled there. Perhaps they succeeded in their own eyes, but "dropping out" was hardly the a satisfactory outcome for the other stakeholders of the *H.M.S. Bounty*. Those of us responsible for the missions, investments and ventures of our organizations across cultures want better outcomes than this.

### ***Hidden Cargo does not Contribute to Organizational Intelligence***

Most of the time cultural adjustment is seen as an individual's responsibility in accepting a posting in another culture. The literature of expatriation is filled with estimates of the bottom-line costs of an individual's failure to adjust and become productive in a new environment. This is supposed to persuade companies to pay closer attention to the processes of expatriation and repatriation through training, on site support, leave policies, etc. Where this is attended to, it often takes the form of company sponsored training, in-house or through contractors, expat support groups, information data bases, etc.

All of these are useful activities, but they can also reflect a limited perspective. The missing element—organizational intelligence about the meaning of its international work. The intercultural efforts and learnings that should be benefiting corporate intelligence seem to be hidden cargo, shipped abroad and then back home in a watertight hold. Few stakeholders know the nature or value of this cargo. The bounty, the benefit of the intercultural transaction might as well be lost at sea. Some organizations have recognize the importance of the intercultural experience by tending to see the successful managing of an overseas as a prerequisite to accepting a top spot in the hierarchy of the mother company back home. Still, this is seen as an individual asset or qualification and little of it's meaning is absorbed by the organizational mind.

How can we take greater advantage of the bounty offered by our organization's international, intercultural experience and make it a part of organizational intelligence. Mostly, this requires changing some mind-sets we have about our organization and its international work. To assist this, here are some diversiTIPs:

- 1) ***Provide some form of “internationalization learning” for the whole organization.***  
Expatriation and repatriation are not things that happen to a few individuals within the company. They are a part of the organization's behavior and belong in some way to everyone. Expatriates are not simply disappearing to reappear some day. Today when electronic communication is so available, this rarely need be. Still it is not uncommon for the expatriate to experience many people in the organization, even at high levels, who should be collaborating with them and supporting them, who do not know such simple things as how and when (or even if they are allowed) to make an international phone call!
- 2) ***Help everyone to understand and appreciate the acculturation process.*** One of the advantages of the multicultural nature of organizations that have hired for diversity is that the acculturation going on at the home office can help us understand the organization's acculturation to international operations. We don't have to go abroad to experience acculturation. The expatriate or immigrant worker in our midst who speaks too loud, tells the wrong joke, or otherwise botches an attempt to fit in, is trying and learning. Not only this person but also those around him or her need to know that what occurred has a context and is understandable. It is not just a strange or humorous or painful event, though it may have elements of all three.
- 3) ***Examine the function and meaning of the policies and systems your organization has in place.*** Many of our systems and policies were created for domestic use and, like so many computer programs that cannot continue dating beyond the year 1999, will crash in the face of international, intercultural demands in the new millenium as well. As Marshall McLuhan put it, “the medium is the message.” If our systems are bounded by local constraints, so are our minds. For example, many U.S. organizations learned to do cultural audits, examining their policies and procedures, publications, marketing and training materials, etc., for elements that might contain bias or insensitivity to their diverse stakeholders. Many organizations that have been doing international business for years have never thought to do audits of the intercultural or international implications of how they do business. Even if very successful, they may still miss out on much of the bounty.

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