

## **Culture, the Transparent Doorway**

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*"We don't know who discovered the sea, but we are sure it wasn't a fish."* Arab Proverb

For many businesspeople, culture could be compared to the glass front found on so many contemporary buildings. On first glance, if the window cleaners have done their job, it appears as if there is nothing there at all. The entire inside of the shop or foyer or office is openly visible, and, so it would also seem, immediately accessible. Most of us, at one time or another, have been seduced by what we saw inside such a building, and, failing to notice a glass wall separating us from it, have got anything from an embarrassing bump to bruises by walking into it. As marketplaces diversify and internationalize, both individuals and organizations are bumping up against culture in a painfully similar way.

It is of the nature of culture to be transparent. We may think of culture simply defined as "the way things are done around here," or, we can see it sophisticatedly analyzed by linguists as "the inner conversations created and handed on by a specific group of people about how to survive and succeed in their environment." Either definition tells us that culture is not the first thing one sees about a group or environment different from one's own.

When we look at others, we see "what" is done more readily than "how" or why it is done. Then we automatically see and interpret others' actions in the light of our own "inner conversations," which might be considerably different from that of others. At this point, we have "hit the wall."

We may see things that look different on the other side of the wall. It may even be this difference that attracts us, but without an understanding of what this diversity means to the people who possess it, we tend to head straight for it without looking for the door. Unlike glass walls, when it comes to culture, we sometimes don't recognize what separates from others even after we've bloodied our noses on it. We know more about the nature of glass than we do about the nature of culture!

There is a strong resistance to seeing culture as a barrier. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. First, there is the transparent nature of culture itself. In business cultures where success is highly equated with measurement of what is visible and countable, there is little inclination to deal with that which is hard to see and measure.
2. The culture of most businesses is not conducive to recognizing and respecting even workplace cultures significantly different from their own.
3. Doing so, in many cases is tantamount to admitting that there exists an area of business savvy and practice for which few if any in an organization have been prepared. Cultural competence belongs to the "soft side" of most businesses. The one that can be indulged a bit in good financial times but rarely makes the cut when the bottom line is being seriously negotiated.
4. Cultural blunders are frequently ascribed to other factors, reinforcing the transparency of the cultural elements of a situation. We blame those who are different for our failure to see the nature of their difference. We blame ourselves or their potential business partners or customers for being unfair, insensitive, or even malevolent.
5. The "victims" of our cultural mistakes may not be inclined to tell us about them. They might find doing so is not politically astute. They may see themselves as too vulnerable if they give outsiders keys to their culture or their culture itself may dictate that it is simply impolite to tell us we have erred.

Today's global business environment is replete with stories of cultural gaffes that have caused major rifts between trade representatives, destroyed labor relations, brought an abrupt end to negotiations over highly lucrative contracts and cast a pall of unprofitability over promising mergers and joint ventures. One current theory has it that the British withdrawal from Hong Kong might have been unnecessary had the British not confronted the Chinese over the issue and put them in the position of having to respond to the situation.

***Finding the Doorway***

After bumping our heads, mumbling, we start looking for an entrance. So, how do we get through this glass wall? Even when we finally come to admit that culture is an important handle for opening relationships and doing business with others, we don't automatically know where the doorway is located. Here are some clues to getting in:

a) Look for the door handle. In other words, get educated about the dynamics of culture itself. Learn what to look for. In intercultural terms this is called "culture general expertise." It consists of such things as processes, models and metaphors (such as this one of "the transparent doorway" which help us know where to look for differences. Some of the tools found in the Kiosk do exactly this. For example, the *Transcultural Communicator* (Simons G., and Walt Hopkins, 1998, ODT. Inc., Amherst. MA) indicates thirteen areas in which differences are likely to occur in everyday management processes.

b) Take a good look at what is inside before barging in. When you have negotiated the door, don't trip over the rug. Culture general information helps you to organize and know when to apply what you learn through your study and experience of a given culture. This kind of information is called "culture specific," that is, it. The DIVERSOPHY game located at [www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com) is a good example of a game that teaches culture specific information. There are many others.

c) In some cases, crashes and clashes have occurred so often, that for safety's sake, and to lower their liability, the owners of a glass wall may choose to break its seamless transparency. They stick company logos, stripes and other designs at eye levels to make sure that customers and visitors don't hurt themselves by running into the cultural barrier. In other words, if you don't know how to do business with a specific group, ask them. If they, too, are interested in doing business with you, they may be willing to coach you about how to succeed. Many countries today produce business literature and Websites that explain their customs and practices. You may want to do the same thing. It's good business.