

“Culture hides much more than it reveals. And, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.”

– Edward T. Hall

Successful global speakers must understand the hidden dimensions of culture.

By Florence Ferreira, ACB, CL



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In our era of globalization, few professionals still make the mistake of speaking abroad without researching the basic protocols and no-nos of their host culture – handing an object to someone with the left hand in a Muslim country, practicing intense eye contact with Easterners or using the thumbs-up “Okay” gesture in most parts of the world. But stories

abound of accomplished speakers who, even after performing this pre-departure homework, have encountered unexpected resistance when addressing a foreign or multicultural audience, ultimately failing at their intended mission. Skills, experience and success with home nationals often fail to reach their new audience, achieve persuasion and meet the objectives. Even worse, presenters often suffer a loss of confidence that took years to develop.

All intercultural experts agree that the observable and explicit cultural differences are just the tip of the iceberg. What contribute to most fruitless international/intercultural presentations are subtle clashes that take their roots

in the deepest layers of culture and are often imperceptible to either side. As anthropologist Edward T. Hall states, “Culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.”

To become successful global speakers, we need to acquire sensitivity toward these hidden dimensions of culture – values, beliefs and assumptions – starting with our own. And we must design and perform our deliveries accordingly. The only way to be aware of our own cultural patterns is to gain perspective, to see them from an outsider’s eyes. In *Riding*



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the Waves of Culture, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner write, “Culture is like gravity: you do not experience it until you jump six feet into the air.”

Six feet into the air is the lowest I jumped, 13 years ago, when I attended my first professional presentation in the United States. Everything was so uniquely American that it made an indelible impression in my newcomer’s mind. Originally from France and raised in France, Peru and Venezuela, I had not been in the country six months when I found myself sitting in this large and crowded hotel auditorium at a business convention in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The keynote address was going to be a motivational speech, I was told, which already was an intriguing concept to me.

Building Credibility with Foreign Audiences

The speaker’s entrance would not have been different if he had just won the lottery. I was captivated by his boisterous appearance on the stage, his excitement and his

self-confidence. And without warning, he shouted in my ears, “So, are you having fun?”

Having fun?! Where are we, at Disney World?, I wondered, feeling infantilized by his question and tone. But as if my fellow audience members also had won the lottery, they all rejoined with a roaring “Yes!” It was not loud enough, to all appearances, so the speaker uttered the question again with reinforced decibels. I just hoped the second time would do it, because this annoying hullabaloo made me want to leave the room.

Thirteen years later, I continue to marvel at the distinctively American contagious stage enthusiasm and poise, but I still feel bullied and irritated when a presenter tries to establish a connection by acting like a puppeteer in an auditorium of third-graders. I also have come to understand that this perception is profoundly influenced by the deep layers of my French culture.

The French tend to be a very independent-minded people and have an aversion to being patronized, especially by a stranger whose authority is not evident in their eyes. Authority, they believe, is first set by the speaker’s credits, and then develops gradually and primarily by intellectual rather than emotional means – from possessing knowledge and skill in the subject matter, essentially.

The French also make a clear distinction between work and “fun” – attending a presentation being considered work – and are used to being a rather passive audience, not expected to participate, even if by an approving smile. On the other hand, American speakers seek to establish rapport with audience members immediately and actively, much like members of an orchestra harmonizing their instruments with a tuning fork before the concert; let’s laugh together, weep about this touching story and feel inspired by those words of wisdom.

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It is a powerful technique, but only if used with intercultural sensitivity when addressing a foreign audience. Keep in mind that American culture is a distinctively time- and action-oriented one. It’s also informal. Speakers need to inquire about the usual rapport-building techniques of the host culture, which, like those of the French, may be more gradual, more on the intellectual or status level and less interactive with the audience.

As a general rule, it is wise to initially tune one’s energy level to that of the audience members rather than pushing them to abruptly switch to ours, and then to build momentum as one’s credibility develops.

The Dangers of Self-Disclosure in International Settings

That morning in Fort Lauderdale, after the initial culture shock, I soon was beguiled again by the speaker’s ease, by his polished movements and by his simplicity of expression. As a former educator, I appreciated how he appealed to all our senses and learning styles, and I rejoiced at his humor and vivid illustrations. I felt I was in just the right country to learn skills from the masters, and one day, I dreamed, I would be the speaker on that stage.

But as I was building castles in my head, a new wave of discomfort knocked me over. To illustrate his self-made manhood, the motivational speaker engaged in generously detailed stories about his alcoholic mother, his violent father and his own inglorious beginnings. My French acute sense of privacy and my Latino-borrowed reverence of family fused with his depictions like a Molotov cocktail in my stomach. I glanced around to check if my fellow listeners were as embarrassed for him as I was, but all I could see in people’s faces were admi-

ration, sympathy and even teary eyes. Culture shock was striking again. (After hearing many other motivational speeches in the years to follow, I actually began to believe that I could never succeed as a speaker in the United States unless I could dig out some sordid personal or family story.)

In their book, *American Cultural Patterns*, authors Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett explain that the American emphasis on the individual self, in combination with direct and explicit styles of communication, “leads Americans to be extremely free in revealing much about themselves in virtually any situation... The American ease of self-revelation is shared by people of few, if any, other cultures.” I could not help but imagine the stupefaction, the loss of face and the speaker discredit that these accounts would have engendered in Asia or Latin America, for example, where family honor is so protected

and respectability so intertwined with a person’s background. It is advisable to stay away from such personal disclosure when performing abroad. If the stories are too meaningful to be removed, the alternative is to credit them to a fictitious subject other than the speaker.

Cultural Meaning of Words

By the end of the Fort Lauderdale session, the presenter caught me off guard for the last time when he said, “Let me ask you a question. If I told you that I developed this fantastic program that will transform your life, that will change *you!* It’s completely free; all I ask is a daily 15-minute commitment... how many of you are willing to sign up and start changing *now?*” And while I still tried to figure out what he meant by “change,” I was taken aback by the large and vigorous show of hands. Did I miss something? Why would I want to change? Change into what? (A pumpkin?) I held my breath for further clues, but he proceeded by promoting additional materials – books, tapes, etc. – that guaranteed redoubled success in the promised change as it added significant costs to the initially free program. Those costs, however, did nothing to dissuade the increasing number of enthusiasts who rushed to the counters, credit cards in hand.

As soon as I got home, I looked up the word “change” in the dictionary, assuming it carried a second, unfamiliar meaning. But I found no other than the one I knew, mainly “to make different,” a neutral concept such as “changing channels.” It took me a few years of living in the country, of actively immersing myself in the culture and in my intercultural studies, to be able to grasp the hidden connotation of the word.

There is, indeed, in the American culture, a second meaning to the word “change,” or I should say, a generalized cultural assumption. In this achievement – risk –and future-oriented culture, “change,” I discovered, is automatically associated with “positive move” and “successful outcome,” which explains its choice as a powerful campaign slogan in the 2008 race for the U.S. presidency. If we add to the mix the value of individualism and the belief that our environment is under our control – in opposition to tenets of fate in other cultures – we find that the stumbling block to success is rooted in our own selves. The solution, then, is to change our selves. *Elementary, my dear Watson!*

As with “change,” other common terms may lose their intended meaning when the receiver is from a different culture. The word “respect” is one of those. In the United States, addressing everyone in the same way, for example on a first-name basis, is in most situations a mark of “respect,” an expression of the American values of *informality, spontaneity* and *equality* in social relations. The problem is that these values are not shared by every culture, and if they are, they are not manifested in the same way. What is intended to be respectful here might be perceived as extremely disrespectful elsewhere. The same goes for “common sense”– which should be reframed as “cultural sense”– or “responsibility.”

In the pragmatic American culture, where self-pride is largely connected with personal achievements, “responsibility” is more often associated with work than with family and friends. Finishing a project on time or honoring an appointment against all odds is regarded as being “responsible.” In the Latino culture, where people take pride mostly in the quality of their relationships, if one’s

childhood friend’s grandmother died, the “responsibility” to attend the funeral and be there for the family may take priority over a previous commitment, even work related.

These words are what Edward Hall, the anthropologist, defined as “high context.” The cultural content is taken for granted by the members of the shared culture, and strangers must be “filled-in” to properly understand the intended meaning. Global presenters need to screen their words, and practice paraphrasing to ensure clarity. Otherwise, they’ll fall into author Robert McCloskey’s predicament: “I know that you believe that you understood what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Since our cultural assumptions are embedded in us – like a fish who doesn’t realize it lives in water until it is removed from it – it is only when we gain awareness of our own deep cultural patterns that we can succeed as international/intercultural presenters. Only by realizing what our deepest cultural motivations are in contrast with others’ will we be able to adjust our communication to build more persuasive and impactful presentations.

Thirteen years after my Fort Lauderdale experience, I decided to share one of my latest speeches – a motivational one – with my brother in Paris. His first remark was: “I’m not surprised it was successful. It is so American!”

Those French! 🇫🇷

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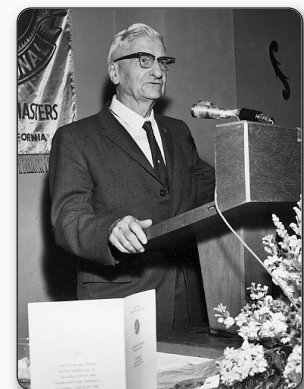
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