



WHY PEOPLE DON'T ALWAYS USE THEIR ASIA SKILLS

Managing your wish to be authentic when working in Asia

1. Map your own deeply held values: the principles that you use to guide your behaviour. Consider how these might bias your judgements of others who behave in a different way from you. Challenge yourself to identify how others who don't understand how you were brought up might misinterpret your behaviour.
2. From this, determine the contexts of greatest challenge for you in the new culture. What skills might present an authenticity demand for you?
3. Check that you are interpreting the new behaviour accurately – in other words, in the same way that those brought up differently from you would see it.
4. Remind yourself of your goals in the situation.
5. Now try to reframe the new behaviour, remembering that an approximation and some small adjustments on your part are likely to be enough.

Authenticity as a never-ending challenge

It's likely that some of your new Asia skills are simply different and intriguing ways of doing something familiar. You're happily able to incorporate the new skill into your current repertoire, without too much trouble. For example, you've probably learned how to present your business card in Asia. It's a little different from your usual practice but – no big deal – you can do it. Maybe you even say to yourself the old cliché, "When in Rome, do as the Romans." But unfortunately skills of this type frequently lie at the more superficial end of the continuum. As you learn new cultural skills, you might find yourself resisting some of them. They feel somehow 'wrong' or 'inauthentic'. You know what to do but you don't want to do it, even when you're aware the skill could be helpful.

Some behaviours present a psychological challenge

Remember there will always be a *range* of acceptable ways to behave in the settings where you work. Every cultural norm has varied expressions, depending on factors such as a person's gender, age, personality, their regional background and so on. For instance, Australians, along with other Westerners, prefer a fairly direct style of communicating in workplace settings. But it isn't the case that every Australian is direct in the same way, or to the same extent as every other Australian.

The idea of being, if you like, 'good enough' in another culture can be quite liberating. Instead of your goal being the unrealistic one of becoming perfectly assimilated, your goal is simply to extend your usual repertoire of behaviours *just enough* so that others can experience you as appropriate.

Studies on acculturation show that it is, in fact, quite unrealistic to expect a newcomer to a culture to fit in perfectly. It's too hard because it involves becoming bilingual and bicultural – goals way beyond the realistic expectations of most Western professionals who don't have the time required to achieve them. It's unrealistic but it's also unnecessary.

A further point is that most well-intentioned people give some latitude to those who, from their appearance, are marked as foreigners. Most Westerners working in Asia are identified straightaway as being foreign! In general, some measure of patience (and even forgiveness) is extended before offence is taken at your cultural faux pas. Prioritise the skill of an appropriate apology. An elegant and sincere apology can bridge a gap, and even cement rapport. You can say the locally appropriate version of this, "I'm sorry. I may have put that too directly. That's my Australian background coming out, I'm afraid! I'm still learning about how best to do things here. But I hope I'm improving!"

But like most strategies this one also has limitations. Research indicates that people are much more forgiving of cultural mistakes related to matters they know are features peculiar to their own culture, and less forgiving when your error relates to something they may assume is a universal norm. The challenge is that things in this second category are often deeper, more complicated and more at odds with your own culture.

A Japanese example

Most Westerners have read about bowing in Japan and the use of polite honorifics such as 'San'. The protocols involved are actually quite complicated for outsiders to master perfectly. But the vast majority of Japanese are well aware that the issue of when and how to bow are distinctively Japanese cultural features. When someone who is clearly a foreigner doesn't quite pull it off, it's rare for a serious problem to result.

However, managing Japanese indirectness in meetings and negotiations presents a more fundamental challenge. The foreigner struggling with this is more likely to suffer business consequences than the one who didn't bow deeply enough. This is because different ways of structuring talk reflect quite profound differences in cognitive style found across cultures. These deeper level differences tend to be viewed by each culture as normal and natural.

What can you do if you resist a new skill?

First, you need to become sufficiently aware of your own cultural background and assumptions so that you can work out what's likely to be hard for you. Second, use your cultural knowledge to interpret accurately the true meaning of the behaviour you're finding problematic. Maybe at least some of your difficulty will be resolved, once you understand it better within that culture's own frame of reference, not your own.

You are experimenting with what has been termed a 'provisional self'. This is much like what happens when you enter a new profession. In all likelihood you went through this transition when you joined your current profession. At first, perhaps it felt slightly false. But step-by-step, you began to incorporate aspects of the behaviour you noted around you from more experienced professionals.

Australians who link their preferred direct style to an underlying value of honesty can find it hard to master Asian indirectness: it can feel evasive and even hypocritical at first. They know what to do but are reluctant to do it. It's about finding ways to reframe the new skill and so make it more comfortable to practise. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans' is exposed for what it is: superficial, unhelpful and unrealistic.