



Going Global: Leading Through Culture Clash

**Global success depends on both the leader and organization.
Here are some lessons to pave your way.**

By Merlin Switzer

Going global offers boundless opportunities for nonprofits. But if you're thinking of giving your organization a global focus, you should first be aware of the potential pitfalls.

Culture Shock

The first thing you need to confront is culture shock. Morgan W. McCall, Jr., and George P. Hollenbeck, in their book *Developing Global Executives*, define "culture shock" as "the surprise and anxiety that we experience as a result of a loss of identity when we are immersed in a different culture."

In their study of global executives, they found that the surprise

generally fell into one of two types. The first occurred when the leader had "incorrect assumptions about other people's values, motivation, willingness to be candid, or lifestyle." The second type of surprise resulted when the leader's actions didn't jibe with the other culture. Both sorts of surprise resulted in a disconnect between the leader and people in the other culture.

Case in point: Don Brewster was an executive pastor in California when he decided to move to Cambodia in 2005 to start the Agape Restoration Center (www.aim4Asia.org) to provide long-term aftercare

for young girls rescued from sexual exploitation and slavery. To become familiar with the culture, Brewster made several trips to Cambodia, each more than two weeks long. He began learning the language and did considerable reading to understand the people's history and lifestyle.

Despite all this, he still encountered cultural shock after his move. "Clear and accurate translation doesn't necessarily result in clear and accurate communication," he notes.

The biggest surprise for Brewster was that Cambodians valued loyalty to superiors so much that they knowingly let him make mistakes. "The inability of national staff to say 'no' to me even when I was wrong was a barrier," he says. It wasn't till he realized that his employees' behavior was driven by fear—fear of

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“the boss,” fear of “losing face,” and fear of violating cultural norms—that he was able to work through the issue. By continually speaking directly and honestly with his staff, he finally overcame their fear and helped them understand that he wanted candor from them.

What You Must Do to Adapt

How can you survive culture shock and move more easily into your global experience? Here are some lessons gleaned from others¹ who work in and study cultures different from their own:

Approach the new experience as a learner. The local people are the experts; you are the student. Show humility, respect, and an open mind.

Practice active listening skills. Take time to truly hear people, not just their words but the underlying feelings they reveal through tone of voice, facial expression, and body language.

Globalization is a fact of life.

Find a cultural mentor. Spend time with someone familiar with the new culture who can help you connect with the people and guide you through the acculturation process.

Beware of the 10 greatest cultural sins. In *Culture Clash*, Thomas Zweifel identifies these 10 costly “sins”:

1. You think the world plays by your rules.
2. You do what you always did in the past.
3. You take English for granted.
4. You don’t respect the cultural pathways for making things happen.

5. You don’t stand in your host’s shoes.

6. You forget to invest in relationships.

7. You jump from vision to action.

8. You take the village by storm.

9. You select the wrong people.

10. You forget that your advice is noise in their ears.

Each of these barriers can impede progress or undermine your entire effort. In addition to avoiding these mistakes yourself, realize that the local people may have their own cultural “sins” that make your task more difficult.

Work from a foundation of core values, and adapt them to the context of the local culture. Values serve as a guidance system to keep people in different countries moving in the same direction. They also provide a context within which to make decisions as challenges arise. Once people agree on their values, they can make decisions independently without working at cross-purposes.²

Celebrate differences, and be flexible. See cultural differences not as obstacles but as opportunities to expand your vision.

Stay the course. It takes time to build relationships. You must be patient, keep trying, and prove you can be trusted over time.

Be ready to laugh at yourself (and with the locals as they laugh at you).

How Your Organization Must Change

Realign all aspects of your organization. The decision to move an organization into another country represents a shift in strategy. When your strategy changes, so must your structure, processes, and the rewards you offer your workers. The key is recognizing that when one dimension of the organization changes, other dimensions also need to be realigned.

Help your staff develop new skills. Going global creates different challenges. You need to iden-

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tify people with the right talents and give them the right training and experiences to meet these new challenges. In addition to in-depth learning about the new culture, be sure to offer ongoing support. ■

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Footnotes

¹Jean Baptiste Kamate of World Vision in Rwanda, Don Brewster of the Agape Restoration Center in Cambodia, and Lorin Staats of the Jian Hua Foundation in China are among those who provided these insights.

²See Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s “Transforming Giants,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2008.

Miscommunication causes frustration on both sides and makes relationships more challenging.

Gaining a Global View

For more keys to adapting yourself and your organization to a global environment, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?** (Vol. 26, No. 6)
- **Be a Better Leader by Becoming a Better Listener** (Vol. 28, No. 2)
- **Creating a Values-Based Road Map** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **Nonprofits Going Global: Opportunities and Problems from a Communicator’s Perspective** (Vol. 13, No. 6)
- **Make the Overseas Leap to Raise More Funds** (Vol. 21, No. 5)