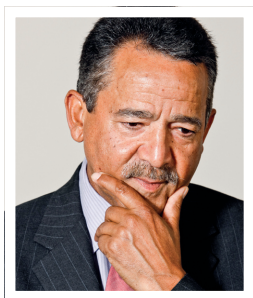


Some Culture Shock Therapy, please!

Societies are becoming increasingly interconnected. You may experience symptoms of culture shock until you learn how to respond to new cultural cues, suggests BONGANI MGAYI.

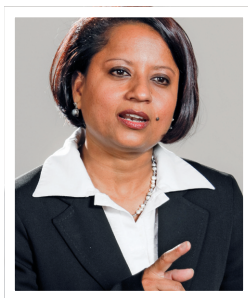


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‘Research has shown that a multicultural environment improves decision-making and problem-solving capacity’

– Prof Julian Sonn



‘People are the same, culture is the differentiator. However, this should not stop us from achieving the ideal of one world’

– Dr Babita Mathur-Helm

THE NIGERIAN PLAYERS are arrogant, they deserve to go home,” sighed Jay-Jay Okocha, World Cup television commentator and former Nigerian soccer captain, after Nigeria drew 2-all against South Korea and was eliminated from the first round.

“They *are*,” echoed Pappi, a Congolese office block caretaker in Woodstock, Cape Town, putting down his glass and rising to go home. He turned his eyes knowingly to me.

I had my own ideas. Maybe this apparent arrogance is a cultural property? Maybe Nigerians, as a people, are just confident. What’s wrong with that?

Africans *don’t* all think and act alike.

Every culture preserves itself through its customs, etiquette, rituals, taboos and language use. Anthropologists consider that cultural expression is a feature that distinguishes human beings from animals. Culture is the sum total of ways of living, developed over time by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to the next.

Societies have become increasingly interconnected because of advancements in technology, and increased mobility and cross-border trading. As a result, cultures are continually imported and exported, exposing people to different behaviours and values. This can bring about *culture shock*

– a term describing the condition suffered by people overwhelmed by unfamiliar cultural expression. The condition often manifests itself as anxiety and frustration.

You will experience culture shock until you come to understand the new culture impinging on your accustomed environment and learn to adjust to the new cultural values and customs without denying your own culture. Two common symptoms of culture shock are the refusal to make contact with people of foreign culture and the refusal to learn about the foreign customs or language.

For many years in Rocky Street, Yeoville, Johannesburg, there was a tavern known as Fitzroy’s – which served traditional isiXhosa meals such as *umnqusho nolusu* (samp and tripe). This is where the isiXhosa-speaking people from the Eastern and Western Cape gathered to socialise after work and over weekends. In Cape Town, there is a Congolese and a Nigerian church in Woodstock, and a Chinese church in Tyger Valley. The Italian Club in Durban regularly hosts concerts and festivals of Italian music and other forms of Italian culture. The United States has Spanish Harlem, one of the largest Latino neighbourhoods in New York city. Exclusive cultural havens like these spring up instinctively, serving to perpetuate stereotyping and alienation.

“The tendency not to work actively on understanding other cultures stifles interaction among diverse groups, sometimes butressing barriers to entry. This has disadvan-

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'If the world of work sees African women as docile, hardworking and not too interactive when they are in fact go-getters, problems will arise'

– Ntombi Langa-Royds

tages. There are lots of things you don't allow yourself to experience. In this way you deprive yourself of an opportunity to learn; thus limiting your perspective," comments Julian Sonn, professor extraordinaire in Leadership Development at the University of Stellenbosch Business School.

"Research has shown that a multicultural environment improves decision-making and problem-solving capacity," Sonn adds.

What if a country promotes interaction between its different ethnic groups, through interventions such as multiracial schools, affirmative action, or mixed neighbourhoods? Wouldn't this be social engineering? Not so, says Sonn. "On the contrary, nature thrives on biodiversity and dies under uniformity," he explains.

The United Nations has declared the year 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity – with slogans like 'Biodiversity is life'. Today there is concern that the period since the emergence of human beings is part of a trend to mass reduction in biodiversity.

"Human beings have a tendency to gravitate towards that which is similar, and that which is different is usually considered more challenging," contends Sonn.

One of the main challenges in the workplace is that any newcomers have to assimilate into an already existing culture, which they can do nothing about and which has no impetus to accommodate the newcomers. In this context minority participants

have no choice but to assimilate into their surroundings. This may lead to uneasiness and even conflict.

"The problem with affirmative action is making it sustainable," says Dr Babita Mathur-Helm, a senior lecturer in Sustainable Leadership at the USB. "It is not the differences among the employees that is the problem, but whether each employee is valued by the organisation. The role of management is to appreciate each individual and what he or she brings to the organisation; and to provide a growth plan."

Mathur-Helm continues: "Although people are the same, culture is the differentiator. However, this should not stop us from achieving the ideal of one world. Leaders should have a non-linear approach, as opposed to a linear approach where cultures are contrasted with each other and therefore never intertwine. In the non-linear environment the thinking is holistic and chaotic, with exchanges at all levels. This however brings more value into the organisation.

"Leaders need to develop the ability to accept the ambiguous, where order emerges from chaos," says Mathur-Helm.

"We should take note of our differences and be sensitive to them so that we are able to communicate better with each other and create a better understanding among us all. Of course, we will at times get the wrong message and that can lead to the wrong conclusions," explains Ntombi Langa-Royds, a facilitator in Human Capital and consultant for USB Executive Development.

"An important factor for an African woman in the workplace is how much exposure that environment has had to African women. If the world of work sees African women as docile, hardworking and not too interactive when they are in fact go-getters, problems will arise. You can't decide what's in the package without unwrapping it first and discovering what's inside," says Langa-Royds.

Mutual enjoyment, across differing cultures, of events such as the Soccer World Cup makes the road to one world seem easy. The difficult part is appreciating different cultures in the workplace without accentuating the differences between them. Repeated exposure to those different to you may very well be the therapy needed to cure culture shock in the workplace. ^a

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