

Cultural Advice for the Pilgrims

November 25, 2013

As we prepare to celebrate one of the most famous American holidays this week, I was reflecting on cultural advice that I would have given to the pilgrims nearly 400 years ago. When the Puritans first established their settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts they were completely unprepared for the harsh realities of co-existing with a culture so different from their own. Unfortunately their fear of the differences impacted their ability to connect meaningfully with their new neighbors. There are many parallels between the pilgrims' quest to set up their new home and expatriates relocating for an overseas assignment today. If I'd been given the chance, below are some suggestions I would have given the pilgrims upon disembarking in the New World.

- **Be open to learning from others even if their methods may not seem as efficient or practical as yours.** Had the Puritans been receptive to some of the Wampanoag Indians' ways, they may have avoided much of the famine that occurred during their first year. It's important to be aware of how things function locally to thrive. Practices and behaviors that drive success at home may not be well received abroad and may even work against you as you adapt to your new environment. Respect that others way of living and working is not wrong—it's just different.
- **Don't impose your ways.** When two vastly different cultures co-exist, mutual adaptation naturally happens over time. When it's forced it often fosters distrust and resentment. The pilgrims may have found that gradually introducing their practices and religion without putting pressure on the Wampanoag to transform their belief system would not have posed as much of a threat. To build a solid foundation with people in your host culture it's important to accept how things are done locally and not insist on changes. Keeping in mind that you are the guest puts you in the observer role and allows you to explore new ways of doing something.
- **Find an ally.** It goes without saying that developing a trusting relationship will help any newcomer learn the ins and outs of a new culture. Instead of sticking within the high walls of their cultural community, had the pilgrims ventured out and shown curiosity about learning the Wampanoag's customs and language, they may have received a more receptive welcome as a friend. Since communication is often one of the main obstacles to establishing connections across cultures, start by learning a few key phrases of the local language. Identifying a cultural mentor will provide deeper insights into your host culture and customs, answer questions that may help you adjust to your new environment more quickly, and provide access to others within your mentor's professional and social network.
- **Be aware of the manifestations of culture shock.** When we are out of our cultural comfort zone, we often adapt a "fight or flight" frame of mind generated by fear of the unknown. This can prompt negative and critical behaviors towards the host culture. Additionally, it can have a deep psychological impact on the

person who is experiencing it. Whether it is settling new lands 400 years ago or relocating abroad for a two-year assignment, gaining a general understanding of the stages of culture shock and the emotional, psychological and physical symptoms of it allows you to be better prepared and to develop some strategies if and when it does occur.

While it's not possible to "go native" when entering a new culture because our cultural norms are as much a part of us as our flesh and bones, we can nonetheless develop a skill set that allows us to thrive in our new environment.

In the meantime, as we look for ways to cultivate gratitude during this holiday season, I wish to thank you for your patronage, your mentorship, your friendship and your confidence in Intercultural Alliances as a service provider for your intercultural needs. I hope you can find time to pause and consider everything big and small that you are grateful for in your lives. Happy Thanksgiving.