Exploring Intercultural Boundaries—Lessons Learned

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This past week for the first time I co-chaired an annual conference for SIETAR-USA (Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research). Interculturalists from around the country and the world congregated in Arlington, Virginia to share their best practices in the field and to learn from one another. The theme of our conference was *Exploring Intercultural Boundaries: Innovation, Inclusion, Inspiration.* My co-chair and I had challenged our own boundaries as we developed some very innovative practices during the four day-long conference. As I reflect on my experience leading a virtual team these past 10 months in preparation for the conference and what I learned during the conference itself, I'd like to share some profound lessons that are important in any cross-cultural work environment.

1) **Always engage with others and listen to their perspectives.** As my co-chair and I created the theme and flow of our conference, we made sure we solicited others' opinions and took their ideas into consideration. In some cases we had to abandon ideas we had but ultimately this collaborative approach motivated our team of committee chairs to be more dedicated to the process. As a leader of virtual teams, it's important to let go and allow for others to share their ideas— even if they don't necessarily match what you have in mind.

2) **Don't be afraid to take a risk if you are being authentic and you have the support of others** (even if they are not fully convinced of your plan). We too often fall into a rut of believing that we need to maintain status quo because something has always been done a certain way or we doubt our ability to push the envelope and try something new due to naysayers. While this may be the safe route, it also crushes innovation. At the same time, since many cultures are not risk-taking it is important to ensure others' buy-in before taking action.

3) **Be aware of the conscious and unconscious biases we hold.** Since research shows we typically form judgments about others within less than a second, we need to be mindful of where our biases originate and how they impact our ability to work with others. Since behavior is often culturally determined, acknowledging that a norm for us may not be a norm for another allows us to reassess our attitude. Stepping back and examining *why* we might feel a certain bias is also important to finding ways to learn more about the person in question. Next we can develop a plan to overcome the bias that might be hindering our ability to connect with her.

4) **Be aware that we all have different ideas of what is ethical behavior…or not.** This may stem from a personal or cultural belief but can be detrimental in our ability to build trust. Before dismissing someone as behaving in an unethical manner, explore her worldview and see if you can find common ground before it damages your business relationship.

5) **Create the time and space to encourage dialogue.** Despite the busyness of our lives, it is critical that we pause, open ourselves and are not afraid to make ourselves vulnerable, particularly when we're working in global virtual environments. When we do this, we can cultivate empathy and foster real connection. This is essential to establishing trust and credibility, particularly with more relationship-oriented cultures.

We frequently stick with behaviors that are comfortable and safe. Yet in cross-cultural work environments it is important to stretch ourselves to explore those boundaries that may seem risky because they push us out of our comfort zone, make us feel vulnerable, and force us to examine our own thoughts and behaviors. Doing so may open us to a deeper understanding of ourselves which will help us communicate and interact more effectively across cultures. What intercultural boundaries have you explored in your lives and what did you learn from them? Click reply to this email and share your thoughts.