

Who Controls Nature?

February 3, 2014

With the recent polar vortex and sub-zero temperatures that have affected much of the U.S., I have been reflecting upon the ways in which different cultures deal with control when encountering unforeseen circumstances in life. While the frigid weather has perhaps not created the same havoc that other environmental disasters—such as Hurricane Sandy or the ubiquitous tornados—have done in recent years, it nonetheless serves as a reminder of how little control we have against the forces of Mother Nature. Yet how we cope with the forces of nature is often very culturally-derived. People from cultures that have an internal locus of control are often well-equipped to adopt a pragmatic approach to dealing with them. For example, Americans pride themselves on their “can do” attitude when addressing adversity. Challenges are frequently viewed as opportunities instead of obstacles as Americans flex their proverbial muscles of self-reliance. In the business environment, this translates as being proactive, rolling up sleeves and taking charge to find quick solutions to problems that arise and making rapid decisions with the confidence of “working out the kinks” at a later date, if needed. There is also a direct correlation with how we view time, innovation, risk and change.

One of the many challenges our clients report when working across cultures often result from the disconnect in perception on one’s ability to control their environment. Take the American concept of time, for example. In the U.S. where time is a commodity, being late for a meeting or appointment is considered disrespectful. There is an unspoken expectation that one should plan accordingly for unforeseen circumstances, such as traffic jams or bad weather, to arrive at the agreed upon time. The individual is responsible for keeping to a tight schedule. In many cultures, however, time is more fluid because it cannot be controlled. So a deadline may be viewed as a desired outcome but because the locus of control is externalized, people have a more flexible view toward it. Expressions such as *Inshallah* (God willing) in Arabic or *Ojalá* (Let’s hope so) in Spanish act as a disclaimer to the individual’s personal responsibility as they imply one’s lack of control against the forces of nature reflective of a more fatalistic approach to life and to work. In cultures with an external locus of control, delays may therefore be forgiven and even anticipated as part of the unpredictable course of life. This is counter to the American belief of “when there’s a will there’s a way.”

To avoid potential pitfalls when working with someone whose locus of control differs from yours, it’s important to consider the following questions:

- 1) How empowered is s/he to taking initiative?
- 2) Are deadlines absolute? Do we need to establish clear milestones to ensure a project is moving along as planned?
- 3) What measures need to be considered prior to making a decision?
- 4) Is the individual held accountable for his/her actions?
- 5) Are detailed instructions necessary or can s/he take charge with minimal information?

While many of our work practices are due to those aspects of culture that are difficult to articulate, similar to the climate, we need to be patient to recognize that spring will eventually come. Developing a few strategies to address some of those differences may be the antidote to how you weather those unpredictable “storms” in your global work environment.