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Learning a New Culture

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The world has never been so small and dynamic, considering the current trends of human and product mobility. Surviving and thriving in such an environment require cultural knowledge – learning culture becomes inevitable. The value system is the basic building block of a culture. Culture is always a group property. Learning a new culture means learning the value system of that culture or of that group of people. Learning a new culture is not easy but not impossible either. One must engage with his/her entire body; head, hands and heart for internalising the value system of a new culture. In addition, willingness and drive to interact with people, nature and weather are crucial in the learning process along with speaking the language of the new culture.

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Learning a New culture – A Crucial Measure for Adaptation

Human beings' inbuilt neural machinery drives them toward bonding with others. This bonding process instigates people to form groups. People form groups, among others, by binding together through links of family, friendship, work, style, sports teams, religion, and culture (Eagleman 2015, 163). A cultural link is a crucial background factor in forming groups. What is a culture? A culture is considered as something that is learned. It comprises norms and values and governs human behaviour to a particular-direction, does not change easily, which is characteristic of a particular-group, and is transmitted over time from one generation to the other (Kazi 2009, 97). The definition exposes that a culture is a learning outcome. Besides, culture is a group property. According to Kazi, values are the principal building block of a culture (Kazi 2009, 104). Social value and cultures are inseparable from each other.

Consequently, learning a new culture signifies learning the value system of that culture or about a group of people. Hatch (1997) states that values are the social principles, goals, and standards held within a culture to have intrinsic worth. They define what the members of an organization determine as important. They include freedom, democracy, tradition, wealth or loyalty. Values constitute the basis for making judgements about right and wrong, which is why they are also referred to as a moral or ethical code (Cited in Kazi 2009, 104–105). Values are emotionally charged priorities learned during the purely human process of socialization (Terpstra and David 1985, 117). Of our value systems, a significant portion is genetically determined. The rest is attributable to factors including national culture, parental dictates, teachers, and similar environmental influences (Robbins 1998, 133).

Learning a new culture necessarily requires the understanding of its value system. Head, heart, and hand approach may assist in the process. A triangular psychological approach head, heart and hand which Cope (2003, 23) has used in consulting change management context may be appropriate in culture learning as well. This basic psychological approach may be suitable because a human being is a complex system involving the interaction of behaviours, emotions and thoughts. Compared to history, the world has never been so small and dynamic in terms of human and product mobility as it has been lately. Therefore,

learning of a new culture may be more logical nowadays due to the following reasons: (1) multicultural workplace, hiring and retaining talents; (2) international trade, investment and education; (3) cross-border migration and demographic change; (4) travelling and tourism; and (5) cooperation and partnership across national boundary. The stated reasons show that in the contemporary world cultural learning encompasses every profession and professionals from an ordinary worker to an executive.

Cultures can be categorised by using group affiliations. At the apex of this categorisation is the nation state or national culture. A completely homogeneous nation state is seldom found in practice. There are sub-cultures that are based on ethnicity, religion, region, language, generation, and gender. Besides national culture, the other most discussed culture grouping is the organisational culture or corporate culture. Studying family culture is also crucial for people in business, because family is the root unit of any national culture (Kazi 2009) and has ample influence upon it.

The current article focuses on learning the value system of a new national culture rather than one's own culture. Alongside the psychological head-heart-hand approach, this article shows the writer's experience of learning a new culture. Cultural intelligence is an important concept that contributes immensely to learning a new culture. Cultural intelligence and learning a new culture are somehow two different things having dependency upon each other. Cultural intelligence, according to Ealey and Ang (2003) is a person's capability to adapt as he/she interacts with others from different cultures (Cited in Macpherson 2017, 134). However, learning a new culture means internalising the socio-cultural value system of another culture. In effect, cultural intelligence and learning a new culture are not separate from each other but complementary to each other.

Learning a New culture – Open the Doors for Survival

Learning a new culture is a type of change process, and resistance to change is very common. In addition to our own culture, where we were born and brought up, the other resistance factor to cultural change process could be our brain plasticity. Dias (2018) states that the human brain is at its peak of neuroplasticity around at the age of ten. That means one can effectively sculpt how one wants the brain to function. Then, that functioning can become locked in and it is very hard to change, but not impossible (349). It is very easy for little kids to internalise a new culture and act accordingly compared to adults. However, as plasticity is a continuous process, learning a new culture or more specifically, its value system is also a never-ending process – people learn new stuff all the time.

Hofstede, who has conducted study on variations of cultures based on work-related values, found that managers and employees vary on five value dimensions of national culture. The five dimensions are (1) power distance, (2) individualism versus collectivism, (3) masculinity versus femininity, (4) uncertainty avoidance and (5) long-term versus short-term orientation. (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). There is even a sixth dimension called indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). Apart from Geert Hofstede, other scholars who have contributed to the study of culture are Richard D. Lewis, Charles Hampden-Turner, Fons Trompenaars, Philip R. Harrison, Robert T. Moran and Edward T. Hall to name a few. However, the point in this text is not to discuss the cultural models of the scholars but the internalising process of learning a new culture. Nonetheless, knowing those models would obviously assist someone to learn a new culture rather than obstructing it.

Back in 1991, when I came to Finland, reading the Cultures and Organizations – the software of mind by Geert Hofstede helped me a lot to know and understand the value system of Finnish society. One thing I have understood by living in Finland for these long years is that cultural learning never ends, it is an ongoing process – “one has to bring oneself up to date.”

In discussing a new culture, some sort of stereotyping is quite common in the academic circle. This text does not specify any culture and its learning process, rather, it focusses on general socio-cultural values where nations may put varied priorities. In addition, it discusses how to internalise those value priorities for living, working, and dealing with people. Nations may vary, among others, in the following value considerations: (1) dealing with time – circular or linear; (2) person versus organisation; (3) facts versus myth; (4) age versus expertise; (5) achievement versus ascription; (6) rationality versus intuition; (7) freedom versus captivity; (8) authoritarianism versus democracy; (9) reactive versus interactive; and (10) being versus doing. People from different cultures may pay varied importance to the mentioned values. How to internalise those values? Can they be internalised at all? The answer is probably a yes. The internalising process is not easy but not impossible.

How have I internalised the Finnish culture? Although, still feeling so helpless in so many occasions, I feel so comfortable and confident in so many other cases – I am learning Finnish culture all the time so are you. What are the factors that have helped me the most? Willingness and drive to interact with people as well as the nature and the weather have helped me the most to come very close to understanding the Finnish culture. I would advise you to be in interaction with these three elements on a continuous basis to internalise a new culture. Give your utmost effort to language learning process – the host culture enjoys hearing you speak the local language. Give time to the learning process as neural changes also happen in you as learning process of the new culture goes on. Do not try to change yourself completely, it is not possible. Time to time, your own values would be in contradiction with your host cultural values consciously or unconsciously – once you migrate, you create a permanent tension with yourself for the rest of your life. Despite learning many nice and new things the tension perpetuates anyway.

Learning a New culture – An increasing Need for Us

Head, heart and hand approach may be instrumental in internalising a new culture. Using head in learning a new culture involves things like understanding the values, beliefs and taboos of the new culture. Understanding may take place in many ways, for instance, through reading books, joining training sessions and actively participating in different socio-cultural events. The newfound understanding is not enough as it is. Hand is synonymous to body in this perspective- the action dimension of human being. Your newfound understanding will have to be backed up by your action. Adopting some of the traits and habits of the new culture will help you deepen your understanding and will demonstrate respect for the other culture. Adapting to a new culture requires confidence, perseverance, the willingness to get it wrong and the ability to recover (Macpherson 2017, 135–136). The heart dimension strengthens the learning process of a new culture and internalise the new culture.

As mentioned above, there is no point to hurry in the cultural learning process as neural changes take place while learning a new culture. However, one must be active in the learning process. In cultural learning or in the adaptation process, one may face these traditional phases as in a honeymoon phase, crisis or cultural shock phase, adjustment phase, and adaption phase. Different people may need varied amount of time and effort in the learning

path. However, the challenge is how one sticks to the learning process. Constant dedication to the learning process is required. Learning of a new culture signifies somehow changing oneself. This is difficult but not impossible. People will learn a new culture and survive with people previously unknown.

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