



s a y anything
to anyone, anywhere

5 keys to successful
cross-cultural communication

g a y l e c o t t o n

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Praise for *Say Anything to Anyone, Anywhere*

“Different is normal serves as a compelling theme throughout this comprehensive look at communication across cultures and its implications for building bridges one to one. Highly informative, entertaining, and readable.”

—**Dianna Booher, Author of *Communicate with Confidence* and *Creating Personal Presence***

“This book is an essential companion for anyone who works with people from different cultures or travels to different countries. With clear and insightful examples, it shows how to communicate effectively and easily with any culture, anywhere. Well written, educational, and fun! Read before you go.”

—**Dan Poynter, CSP, Editor of *Global Speakers NewsBrief***

“I can’t express how much Gayle’s coaching changed my life and career. She has dramatically improved my ability to communicate effectively and speak in public, which has greatly enhanced my effectiveness as a leader. Her methods are now explained in this must-read book.”

—**Don Finkell, CEO, Shaw Hardwood**

“Gayle’s approach to presentation coaching has been very beneficial to me. Her techniques, not available in her book, have helped me stand before rooms of hundreds of guests and present with confidence and clarity.”

—**Key Coker, Dallas City President, BBVA Compass Bank**

“I met Gayle when she spoke on effective cross-cultural communication at an Entrepreneur Organization (EO) conference in Marrakech. Her book is indispensable to anyone who interacts with different cultures . . . which is everyone!”

—**John L. Wade, CEO, Gung-Ho Companies**

“With the world becoming ever more connected, understanding cultural differences has never been more important to personal and business success. Gayle’s book provides a practical and actionable road map for global adventurers to follow.”

—**Rich Beck, Senior Vice President, PepsiCo Global Operations**

“I have worked with Gayle and Circles of Excellence on several occasions over the years in both local and global capacities leveraging their expertise to improve interpersonal communication within my business. This book is the culmination of these perspectives outlining how we can, and need, to adapt to the global culture we live in today.”

—**Tim Danks, Executive Director, Assurance and Managed Services, Huawei Technologies USA**

“Gayle’s book gives a unique perspective on the cross-cultural challenges facing today’s global business managers. She enlightens us as to the many *visible*, and more often *invisible*, aspects of interactions and communications between team members operating with very different mind-sets and within greatly different paradigms.”

—**Mark Dendle, CFO, The ECOM Group**

“Cultural issues in international business are a critical success factor. Few possess the understanding and grasp of the issue better than Gayle. As an international business lawyer, I live her teachings every day.”

—**Manuel Rajunov, Partner, Foreign Legal Consultant, DLA Piper**

“Gayle’s seminars and teachings have had great impact on all students, faculty, and administrative staff who had attended our university. I am very pleased to see that Gayle has now brought his expertise to this excellent guide.”

—**Rogelio Palomera, Professor, University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez**



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gayle cotton



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Dedicated to my global family of every race and color.

*We are all linked by the greatest culture of
all . . . the human culture.*

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, as I take my early morning walk through our neighborhood, I listen to and watch the people familiar to me starting their day. As I walk, I can't help but think about the life that is currently going on in other parts of the world, with different time zones and climates, each place with its own unique approach to the day at that moment in time.

I can see in my mind the bustle of the souks in Dubai. I can hear the sound of Italian men at a corner café saying, “buongiorno!” as others pass by. I can literally taste a fresh-baked pastry from a patisserie in Paris. I can smell the fish being hauled in from the day's catch in bright, colorful nets in Malta, and I can feel the cool breeze as the farmers in the Swiss Alps bring their cows in for the night with bells ringing . . . each with a unique tone of its own.

I'm reminded that life around the world has countless similarities, yet so many differences. How magnificent to imagine this, and how reassuring to know that as I look at the evening stars, children in China are just waking up, families in Australia are preparing their morning breakfast, and the Tokyo subways are a flurry of morning commuter activity.

Our world is a marvelous place now accessible by anyone. What was once so dauntingly large and difficult to explore is now only hours away by plane or a few moments away with real-time technology.

I feel most privileged to have had the opportunity to live and work in different parts of the world. I was prepared for it early on, having been raised by a predominantly Swedish family with a little dash of Irish. My maternal grandmother proudly introduced herself as, “Elsa Astrid Wilhelmina Petersen Nelson!”—stated in the finest Swedish accent. I grew up in a small university town where I was fortunate to interact with people of many nationalities and cultures. I ultimately married a Frenchman who could affectionately be referred to as Pepé Le Pew. Although I never really thought my career would lead me into cross-cultural education on a global basis, it's been a wonderful, delightful, sometimes embarrassing, and certainly a most challenging and rewarding experience.

It all started in 1989, when I moved to Geneva, Switzerland, to work with a corporate training company to develop training programs for international companies and branches of the United Nations. This company eventually led to the creation of Circles Of Excellence Inc.

We developed training programs for marketing, management, and presentation skills, but soon discovered that each and every course needed to be adapted, in some way, for the respective culture with which we worked. Furthermore, we realized it was necessary to adapt our communication style and presentation approach to even discuss—*let alone sell*—our services! We found we needed to be able to **say anything to anyone, anywhere**. Thus began the “**5 Keys to Successful Cross-Cultural Communication**,” a process we designed for our success as well as for the success of the readers of this book.

5 Keys to Successful Cross-Cultural Communication

Key One—*Create* proactive cross-cultural communication

Key Two—*Rapport* secrets to bridge the cultural gap

Key Three—*Organize* productive interactions

Key Four—*Strategies* for relationships

Key Five—*Success leaves clues*

The first letter of the first word of each key spells the word *cross*. When the first word of each phrase is put together into a phrase, it says the following:

Create Rapport and Organize Strategies for Success

The Cross of Cross-Cultural

This phrase was the key to success for Circles Of Excellence. We discovered that the most important asset in today's easily accessible, global business marketplace was the ability to successfully **cross** from our own **culture** into another. This meant creating common bonds, quality business or social relationships, and ultimately friendships based on respect, trust, and understanding.

As readers will find out, *awareness is the first step . . .*

Create Proactive Cross-Cultural Communication

Avoid Reactive Communication

The chapters in Key One will cover what you need to know about cultural development in order to be proactive in your cross-cultural communication. Whether you are working with or travelling through different cultures, a pattern in your communication with others is likely to emerge: If you aren't *proactive*, you will be *reactive*. Anyone who has negotiated with different cultures, managed a multicultural workforce, or simply visited other countries knows that first impressions are made quickly—and can last well beyond that initial interaction. It is very difficult to overcome a cultural offense, no matter how unintentional it may be.

We all want to avoid embarrassing miscommunication and misunderstanding. This is why it's so crucial to *proactively* adapt your style and approach in a way that is comfortable for the culture with which you are communicating. You need to understand what makes cultures so different from one another and become aware of what may work against you due to preexisting cultural perceptions.

Cultures are a bit like the chicken and the egg. How did they all begin? Cultural development is influenced by many factors, including language, climate, and environment. These impact the human nervous system, which in turn creates unique variations in communication styles and behavior. As we travel and experience different cultures, these experiences become part of our cultural layers, which in turn makes us more comfortable with cultures other than our own. This basic understanding of cultural science creates the, aha! to enable you to *maximize* effective communication and *minimize* ineffective communication in any culture.

Chapter 1

What Makes Cultures So Unique?

Differences Are the Spice of Life!

Have you ever given serious thought to what creates cultural differences? We all know, of course, that these differences *exist*, but what is really involved in making each culture so unique? This is one of the first questions we ask attendees in our cross-cultural classes at Circles Of Excellence. It provokes thought in everyone—and quite the myriad of different responses!

Some people assume we are just born different. Others cite our country, region, and language as forces that create these differences. Then there are those who feel that tradition, beliefs, religion, and family are what make us so distinct from one another. Of course, every one of these answers is absolutely correct; there is no wrong answer.

When we consider the different elements that affect cultural distinctions, we realize that it all starts from our moment of birth. Before we can even see, we hear language all around us—and for the most part, the main language we hear will become our mother tongue language. That language's sound, expression, and melody will have a profound effect on how we develop and communicate.

As we grow up according to our country's, region's, and even neighborhood's rules and traditions, we develop cultural beliefs and values that will remain with us throughout the rest of our lives. How and where we live creates immediate perceptions about who we are and how we are likely to behave. We're all familiar with the labeling and branding that are implicit in a statement such as, "Oh, you're from *that* neighborhood [or *that* part of town]." It doesn't matter if it's the best or the worst neighborhood or part of town; you've been identified by where you live. Almost everyone who lives in Dallas knows that if you are from Highland Park, you are from one of the oldest, wealthiest neighborhoods, with one of the best *public* school systems in the city. On the other hand, almost everyone is aware of what "being from the wrong side of the tracks" can connote. Of course, our families, friends, teachers, experiences, and religious beliefs reinforce this kind of labeling and branding—and affect our beliefs and values as well. These things ultimately become part of every person's foundation, no matter what culture we claim.

Our gender, race, and ethnic background clearly have a strong impact on our development. How the genders interact and how people from different races or ethnic backgrounds relate to one another play important roles in what we believe is appropriate—or not. Our friends, colleagues, education, and work/life experiences can reinforce these beliefs—and in some cases, dramatically change them.

And let's not forget the impact that different regions or countries to which we travel can have on our approach and outlook. These further define both how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. We change dramatically when we travel to places with different cultures and languages from our own. As we absorb these differences and learn to understand or speak another culture's language, it becomes part of who we are. We begin to develop what is referred to as cultural overlay, a blending of our own culture with another. The more we experience other cultures—and especially speak the culture's language—the more cultural overlay and blending we have. For example, as I discussed

the book's Introduction, I was raised by a predominantly Swedish family in the United States and lived in Europe for several years early in my career. I'm now married to a Frenchman and live in the United States. As a result, I've often been asked if I feel more European or American. My answer is that I feel Euro-American, a *blend* of both. I still prefer the long European lunches and the social camaraderie that accompanies them; however, I also like the United States' direct and focused business style.

In addition, the major events that happen in our lives can certainly change our cultural perception. Our world, beliefs, values, and how we view life have been forever changed by wars, slavery, the Holocaust, tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, and terrorist attacks. And likewise, politics—specifically different countries' current political regimes and leaders—have a tremendous impact on how we view the nations of our world. When we teach in different countries, natives of those countries have strong feelings about our current president, as well as the United States' recent policies and actions. Indeed, some countries have boycotted the United States for some of our political actions, while others have praised us.

Although we've come a long way—as both a nation and a world—from where we once were, judgment and discrimination still manage to weave their way through the innermost layers of global perception and cultural differences. I often remind myself that if I had been born in a different culture and walked in another's shoes—and had the same experiences as the person in those shoes had—would likely be quite similar to that person in cultural perspective.

International adoption is a perfect example of this. When a young child of a particular race and ethnic heritage is adopted into a different culture, that child will likely develop the new culture's ethnic preferences, regardless of its native race and heritage. And the younger the child is when adopted, the more likely it is that this will be the case. The older the child is when adopted, the more likely there will be greater native culture retention along with the cultural overlay.

As we begin to truly understand what creates cultural differences, we realize that it's fair to say that “different is normal.” Clearly, there is no right or wrong culture; these kinds of distinctions belong to the actions of people within every culture. Even within individual countries, there can be vast cultural distinctions, accents, and languages in different regions. There is no doubt an array of cultural variations within the United States. I have heard many times that the Southern states are “slower and more social” in their business style—a tendency that can be quite annoying to the northeastern states. On the other hand, I've heard that the fast pace of the business style in the northeast can be perceived as “too direct and rude” in the Southern states. And everyone seems to agree that the west coast, especially California, is a “culture unto itself”!

With all our naturally created cultural nuances, distinctions, and unique ways of life, it may come as a surprise that *we do have a culture in common*. This is the human culture, where we share bodies, minds, and hearts in common. This is a culture where we are all created as equals. It's a culture where we live, work, and play on our planet in common . . . Earth. The human culture is where we find our *common bond* and where we are able to connect with one another in mind and spirit. It encompasses each and every one of us, and it can be tapped into at any time and from any place. It is our heritage and the door to understanding both our differences and similarities. It is the *bridge* that we can use to cross from one culture to another.

Chapter 2

Understanding the “Cultural Layer Cake”

We All Have Layers in Our Cakes

In this day and age, very few people can claim to be from only one culture. Most of us are like a slice of cultural layer cake, with several cultures blended one on top of the other. In addition to our ancestry, these cultural layers are shaped by a variety of factors. Everything from our race and gender to events and politics contributes to their composition. Anything that has had a strong impact on us from birth on, is a part of those layers. The influences of our parents, family, friends, neighbors, and teachers have had a hand in creating our cultural makeup.

Think, for example, about a favorite teacher, coach, or boss who may have inspired you in a particular way. Someone like this who had a strong influence on you added to your existing layers—you may have even created a new one.

I remember one university professor in particular who significantly affected my life direction and clearly helped create one of my most important layers. As a typical floundering university freshman, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. My SAT scores indicated that I had an aptitude for Russian literature. How that was derived I don't know; however, I do know that it didn't really pique my interest at that point in time!

Everything changed in my second semester, when I took a humanities class from a new professor who forever changed my view of the world. Even after the first class, I knew that humanities and behavioral science would somehow find a place in my career. My professor's point of view about different civilizations around the world, as well as his perspective on global cultures, opened my eyes, and I saw the social and cultural sciences in a whole new light.

He began, interestingly enough, with a foundation in neuroscience, the link of the human culture that connects us all. He then expanded on how neuroscience influences the cultural layers that make each culture so unique. He took us on a journey of exploration that unfolded in an unbiased way, as we experienced cultures from around the world. Ultimately, he challenged us to imagine what our lives would have been like had we been born in a culture other than our own. His advanced classes became so popular that there was a semester's wait to get into them! I'm sure many of the readers of this book have had similar experiences with someone who has had a profound impact on their lives. When that happens, it is difficult to imagine how your life would have turned out had it not been for this person's influence.

As we explore our own and others' cultural layers, we begin to understand how and why we are the way we are. Your parents' and grandparents' ancestry, for instance, directly affect how you are raised to view life and what you consider to be most important. Since I was born into a first-generation Swedish family that had just a touch of Irish from one grandfather, the Swedish culture played an important role in my life. For those who are familiar with the Swedish culture, you're probably aware that they can be a bit more reserved when compared with, for example, the Italian culture (which is an understatement to some!). However, because my grandparents had come to the United States by boat

just prior to World War II, they were anxious to learn the English language and adopt the American way of life. They were patriotic and proud to be American, so they experienced cultural overlay very quickly. They rarely spoke in Swedish, and as a result, I really picked up only a few phrases here and there. The only times they *did* speak Swedish were when they didn't want me to know what they were saying! As for my Irish grandfather, he never let the rest of the family forget that he was "the old Irishman." His influence definitely added some fun and Irish mischief to the family.

When you really look at culture, you recognize that it is a *shared design* for living within family and community. That design influences how we are raised to view and live life. As a result, we begin to develop cultural *tendencies*. Although dominant cultural distinctions affect the culture as a whole, it's important to keep in mind that cultural tendencies develop to varying degrees on an individual basis. As a result, although we need to be aware of the cultural tendencies that may influence a relationship, it's equally important to relate to people as individuals and avoid stereotyping.

Thanks to the ease of travel and today's virtual communication, we are beginning to *homogenize* a global culture. Some cultural distinctions are blending, and others are disappearing altogether. This was one of the concerns when several countries in Europe formed the European Union (EU). Every country—currently 27—wanted to make sure it retained its own unique language, culture, and way of life. Fortunately (and not surprisingly), each country's unique characteristics have remained intact and they probably always will.

Today's technology is having a dramatic effect on global cultural homogenization. Almost everyone now has immediate virtual access to other cultures. Consequently, cultural tendencies and distinctions will continue to change as we adopt one another's styles and ways of interacting—and this is how cultural integration and homogenization is happening, in some way, to us all.

The following section provides a list and descriptions for some of the factors that influence how some of our cultural layers originate and affect our behavior.

Some Major Things That Impact Our Cultural Layers

- **Mother tongue and secondary languages**

Our mother tongue—the first (and sometimes only) language we learn—has one of the strongest influences on our cultural layers. It is the basis for how we initially think, behave, and communicate with one another. Secondary languages usually have a lesser effect, unless that secondary language becomes the predominant language, in which case it could have an equally strong influence.

- **Race**

The race into which we are born creates a variety of perspectives about our cultural characteristics as well as how others perceive us. We still have a long way to go in eliminating racial prejudice globally; however, as cultures blend and understanding increases, racial inequality is becoming less of a factor in many parts of the world.

- **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity should not be confused with race. People can be of a particular race and have different ethnic preferences due to their life experiences and environment. For example, if a Chinese baby is adopted by a non-Chinese family and raised in the United States, the child's race will always be Chinese, but the child's ethnic preferences will most likely be American.

- **Gender**

Being male or female certainly has an impact on how different countries and cultures view

different individuals, as gender equality still varies widely around the world. Even when I first worked in Switzerland in the early 1990s, women didn't have the right to vote in one of their 26 cantons (a canton is similar to a state or province). Fortunately, the need for gender equality is beginning to gain momentum globally, and women around the world are slowly, but surely, cracking that big glass ceiling.

- **Local culture**

The local culture is the combined influence of your home life, surrounding environment, neighborhood, and city or village. This is where we experience the support system that develops the foundation for our cultural beliefs and values. Much of human behavior is governed by what we value to be the most important to us. Our values influence the standards by which we measure the quality of our lives against those of others. The flavor of our local culture, whether a rice paddy in Asia or a small village in Italy, will clearly influence those standards.

- **Regional attire**

Attire, and how we are expected to dress, can vary greatly from one culture to the next, as a result of the industry, climate differences, and cultural preferences. In addition, the philosophy regarding what is considered *appropriate* versus *inappropriate* can be very different, and that influences our cultural development and perspective. For example, many Middle Eastern cultures require that women cover their heads in public. Some industries, such as banking, require a professional or “buttoned-up” attire, in contrast to other industries where business casual is acceptable. In the UAE, it's not uncommon to see the traditional attire of the Sheikhs along with the standard business attire, as exemplified in the photo in [Figure 2.1](#), which was taken at a conference where I was a speaker.

[Figure 2.1](#) Business Attire in Dubai



- **Ancestry**

Like our mother tongue language, ancestry can have a strong influence on us. This is especially true if we live in the country of our ancestors or if we are first-generation immigrants in another country. This tends to have less influence, respectively, for second- and third-

generation immigrants.

- **Parents and family**

It shouldn't come as a surprise that this is the foundation of our roots and development. Our parents' and family's involvement—or lack of involvement—in our upbringing and lives makes a crucial contribution to our core layers.

- **Teachers**

Both good and bad teachers strongly affect our cultural layers. Because we spend up to a third of our lives in school—and many people spend even longer than this—their influence helps establish many of our beliefs and values, in addition to guiding our careers and even some personal choices.

- **Friends**

Friends, colleagues, and peers are also our “teachers.” They may, in some cases, even have a stronger influence than our actual teachers. The peer pressure that is often inherent in what our friends feel and say can have a big impact on how we behave and the decisions we make.

- **Our nation or country**

Certainly our home country, or country of residence, has a profound effect on how we live and what we associate with. Whether we feel a patriotic connection or the desire to live elsewhere, our country—and its corresponding beliefs and values—drives our actions in significant ways.

- **Geographic regions, states, provinces, cantons, etc**

It is interesting to note that regions, states, provinces, and cantons within the same country can be vastly different and possibly have an even greater influence on our cultural layers than our country of residence. The cantons in Switzerland that speak German, French, Italian, and Romansh (the fourth national language of Switzerland) are a perfect example of this. The Swiss Germans in Zurich tend to be more reserved in their social and business style in comparison to the Swiss French in Geneva, whereas both the Swiss Germans and the Swiss French are more reserved and less expressive than the Swiss Italians in Lugano.

- **Cities, towns, and villages**

Like regions of a country, cities, towns, and villages have very distinct characteristics that can have a dramatic influence on how we view life. The difference between living in a large city and a small town or village will certainly create unique cultural layers. Life will be quite different for a child growing up in New York City compared with a child growing up in a remote African village. Whereas the child in New York expects to deal with cars and traffic, the child in the African village more likely expects to deal with wild animals and potential dangers.

- **Neighborhoods**

Neighborhoods influence and define us within the context of our city, town, or village. They can imply status, wealth, poverty, a specific ethnicity, or simply a unique section of town. We all know of neighborhoods that create certain perceptions about the people who live in them.

- **Border countries, states, and provinces**

Border countries definitely have an influence on our cultural layers, and this is especially the case in smaller countries with easy access to other countries, such as those in Europe. Even a country as large as the United States—with Canada to the north and Mexico to the south—can

count on these two nations to have a major impact on U.S. culture in states near those borders.

- **Religion**

Religion is often one of the dominant or core layers in our development, and it is one that can be directly connected to an entire culture's history. It is frequently the judgment factor between different cultures. It creates tremendous passion in people and consequently has been the cause of many wars.

- **Social class**

Social class, in varying degrees, is apparent in every country and culture around the world. There are the wealthy and the middle class in the United States, the dukes and duchesses in England, and the counts and countesses in France, along with all the other levels of global nobility and royalty. In many cases, one's social class is designated by birth and remains with the person throughout his or her life. I'll always remember the time my daughter was hospitalized in France. She had a private room with her first and last name on the door. In contrast, all the room doors around her had the titles of counts and countesses or other noble designations. It was rather humorous, because her door was the one that everyone noticed because she had no title!

- **Education**

The level of our education and our vocations of choice greatly influence our view of life. They often supersede old cultural layers that we've outgrown or that have changed as a result of our experience. A good example is the technical industry, which is now led by people from India, China, and many other parts of the world. Due to the possibilities that were available to highly trained technical engineers, it has become a field of choice that has opened doors for them to be able to live and work all over the world.

- **Profession**

Our choice of profession, where we work, and what type of companies we work for is clearly a chief component of our lives—because this is where more than half of our life learning and growth happens. It is the place where we spend all day, every day, and therefore makes a huge contribution to the development of our cultural layers.

- **Workplace colleagues**

The people with whom we work—as well as their views, habits, and attitudes—have a substantial effect on how we perceive our work environment and fellow colleagues. Today's international workplace is very multicultural, so lots of learning goes on both interpersonally and virtually. The experiences we have working with colleagues in our own country or abroad will definitely add to our layers.

- **Experiences**

These are what change our existing layers and perspective. Life experiences alter and expand the way we view people, cultures, and countries and what we consider to be comfortable (and uncomfortable). For example, after I worked in Asia for a period of time, it became very comfortable for me to bow slightly while making a two-handed business card exchange. I actually become so comfortable with this practice that I found myself doing the same after returning home to the United States, even with credit cards! And while living in Geneva, I always asked the bank tellers if they spoke English, so it was pretty surprising to a teller in the United States when I asked the same thing in French!

- **Events**

You may wonder how events influence our cultural layers. Yet events are one of the major things that affect how different cultures interact and feel about one another. They can change our cultural perspectives overnight. American companies were boycotted in some places when the United States bombed Iraq without getting support from the United Nations, France, and certain other European countries. In the United States, “French fries” became “freedom fries,” French wine sales dropped, and U.S. citizens avoided French restaurants. On the other hand, when the United States killed Osama bin Laden, Americans were touted as heroes. Events can play a strong role on how cultures perceive one another.

- **Politics**

Like events, politics and world leaders have a strong impact on the global perspective of different countries. Leaders, and the decisions they make, can sometimes be beloved and hated simultaneously depending on where you are and whom you are talking to. The “Shock and Awe” of the Iraq War was both cheered in the United States and booed in many other parts of the world. These mixed feelings were evident everywhere I traveled during that time.

- **Travel**

Travel, undoubtedly, has a tremendous effect on how we feel about other cultures. When you visit a country, you can see and learn firsthand about a culture. More often than not, we are surprised by the similarities and things we have in common, rather than being judgmental about the differences. It can be a real eye-opener, and we usually get a glimpse of the human compassion present in every culture. Virtual travel also expands our cultural layers and helps us learn more about other cultures.

- **Physically challenged**

This is definitely something that cannot be ignored when you discuss cultural layers. The experiences of those with physical challenges and those who interact with the physically challenged unquestionably impact our thoughts, feelings, and how we relate to one another—no matter what culture we are from. This was apparent to anyone who saw the 2012 Paralympics. The triumphs of the physically challenged are triumphs for the entire human culture.

As we explore what creates our unique cultural layers, we begin to recognize that even those who claim to be of *one* specific race or ethnicity still experience many things—and have many qualities—that affect their layers. And when we observe how different elements of life affect these layers, we can better understand the cultural overlay we *all* have. Everyone’s layers were initially created and we then overlaid with new and possibly very different layers of information. Cultural overlay puts a fresh perspective on our existing layers and can even *completely* change the nature of our core layers.

Exposure to different life settings is a good example of how cultural overlay happens. Let’s say that you’ve always lived in a rural setting; you probably have a layer of what *security* means based on that environment. Moving to a big city would then add to that layer by giving you an expanded view of what *security* means in a city environment. This new experience has altered your original core layer and your notion of security. The same thing happens in a broader sense when we travel from one country to another. We experience new languages, different ways of communicating, and more current perceptions of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in that country’s context. Our original layers of understanding change and expand our core layer to include another country’s culture.

One of my most memorable business examples of cultural overlay was when I met a Swedi

customer for the first time, right in my own city of Dallas. Since he had recently arrived from Sweden I expected him to have a typically more reserved Swedish manner. To the contrary, he greeted me in a cowboy hat, gave me a good firm “Texas handshake,” and proceeded to enthusiastically talk about the type of cultural training his company needed. After I recovered from my surprise, I started thinking about his cultural overlay. I asked him where he had lived *besides* Sweden. He told me that he had managed the company operations for the past several years in Italy. He said that the difference between the Swedish and Italian cultures had given him the ability to be comfortable with most any culture and that now he was trying to be Texan! It was obvious that his Italian overlay had dramatically influenced his core Swedish style. He went on to tell me that although his Swedish colleague, whom we were subsequently going to meet, had been in the United States for 12 years, he still took a very “Swedish” approach. In other words, this colleague preferred and was still more comfortable with a reserved style. Consequently, when we met his colleague, we both adapted our communication style accordingly.

A more personal example of cultural overlay occurred when I moved to Geneva, Switzerland, and my daughter arrived after me. She stepped off the plane and was in anguish within 30 minutes. She couldn’t understand or read the language, and she thought all the buildings were “old and ugly.” She wondered why there were “no shiny, new buildings like in Dallas.” Her whole world had changed. It was a year before she learned to appreciate the classic architecture and the French language (in which she subsequently became nearly fluent). At that point, her core layer of life in Dallas had changed and expanded to include Geneva and the European way of life.

The next time you meet someone from another culture, or meet someone who is quite different from what you expect, think about what might comprise his or her cultural layers. Ask some general questions about the other person’s experiences and share some things about yours. This kind of interaction could be your key to understanding each other. And above all, keep in mind that cultural tendencies are just tendencies. We all have layers in our cake, and those layers are the *link* to our multicultural understanding.

Chapter 3

How Many Strikes Are Against You?

Managing Preexisting Cultural Perceptions and Misconceptions

Every country's citizens have to deal with other countries' and cultures' preexisting cultural perceptions or "strikes" against us. And we all have preconceived notions about countries and cultures other than our own.

If we happen to be a "U.S. American," we've probably heard comments about "dumb Americans" based on another culture's perceptions of our ignorance of other countries, their languages, their way of life, and even geography. One of the things I often hear from other cultures is that many U.S. Americans don't know their geography as well as they should. (I think most of us *would* admit that many U.S. Americans could use a good world geography lesson!) Roper Public Affairs conducted several surveys for the National Geographic Society that concluded that the average U.S. American aged 18 to 24 answered *incorrectly* 50 to 70 percent of the time when asked to locate various countries around the world. The Association of American Geographers in Washington, DC, called the results "alarming and discouraging." I refer to Americans from the United States as U.S. Americans because when you think about it, there are North Americans, South Americans, Central Americans, and Latin Americans, so who are the *real* Americans? Technically, all the countries that are part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which includes the United States, Canada, and Mexico, or the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which includes Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the United States, can claim to be American. As a result the term *American* has taken on broader meaning in many senses, so some countries have started using the term U.S. American. Unfortunately, this is sometimes shortened to the term *U.S.ers*, which doesn't have the best connotation when you look at how it's spelled. In light of that, *U.S. American* seems to be the term of preference.

When I started working in Switzerland in the early 1990s, I taught communication, management, and sales courses based on behavioral and cultural science. I was working at United Nations branches in Geneva, as well as for many international companies around Europe and Africa. It didn't take long for me to find out that I already had three strikes against me—strikes that definitely affected my credibility. In fact, with a group of senior bankers in Zurich, you would have thought I was from Mars or wearing a rainbow-colored wig given how surprised they were when they realized I was the instructor!

I now often ask my current audience members to guess what those three strikes against me were. Most of them are pretty quick to respond with the fact that I am American. Strike 1—since the European perception is generally something like, "What do Americans know about different cultures?"

Next, someone in the audience will usually identify strike 2: the fact that I am female. At that time

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