

LIGHT BULB MOMENTS

By day, Antonie Knoppers is an actor, stalking the stage in Shakespearean drama or appearing in famous Dutch soaps as a corrupt lawyer or a villainous doctor. But by night - shazam! - Antonie is a multicultural shape-changer.

Well, not really by night:

Antonie - star of hit Dutch TV shows and the Richard Gere film *The Hoax* - also plays parts in seminars run by Intercultural Business Improvement, giving its trainers and licensees a personal taste of cross-cultural negotiation and influencing.

"It's one thing to understand cultural differences - it's much more vivid to experience them," says Antonie. He should know: He grew up between the US and the Netherlands, with a Dutch father and a US American mother.

Antonie works between New York, Los Angeles and Amsterdam.

In the Netherlands, he has starred in the police drama *Flikken Maastricht* and the long-running soap *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* (*Good Times, Bad Times*). "I play a lot of bad guys, for some reason," he says, with an evil laugh. "Managers, lawyers, doctors."

He was an actor with a solid background in Shakespeare and villainy when one of the big Dutch development banks hired him to act in training scenarios. He discovered a new talent. "I played a ghoul executive who had taken over the bank in the future: I came into the boardroom and told the managers how things were going to be different," he says.

"I was doing it in a very American style - in a sort of nice way. But if you really listened to what I was saying it would give you pause to go 'Oh! I don't think he's being that nice!'. It was my way or the highway."

Oscar van Weerdenberg of Intercultural Business Improvement

was one of the trainers in this course, and he was blown away by Antonie's acting and its effect on people's understanding of the concepts they were training. Oscar asked Antonie to work with him

By Lucille Redmond



creating scripts to illustrate the core intercultural competencies involved in IBI's own training.

The scripts are tremendous fun - and very culturally revealing.

Antonie's favourite scenario is a conversation between an Indian team member, and his boss. Antonie is the Indian, while the boss will be played by one of the professionals attending the seminar and learning about the cultural competencies.

The boss, in the scenario, wants the Indian staffer to come in on his day off. The rest of the people taking the seminar watch their conversation attentively, taking note of the cultural signals, and afterwards they can share feedback with the role-players on what has happened, how the two cultures have interacted.

"We briefly explain the situation: 'You're a manager; you're about to have a conversation with Rajiv, one of your team members'," says Antonie.

"You're about to launch a new website and you need everyone to be there in case anything goes wrong. Have a little conversation to ascertain if he'll come in on his day off, and then maybe ask him about his family - you've had dinner there before, and you know them'."

The play lets have proved extraordinarily successful, opening out people's feel for intercultural work.

"Oscar's amazing, he has a dry, funny sense of humour - but there is a lot of theory, and so it's very effective to say 'This is the theory - now, do it!'," says Antonie.

"People are thrown in with the lions: They've been hearing about, say, intercultural communication, but now they have to apply it."

Antonie was nervous of presenting this scenario before a group of managers from all over the world - including some from India. But the second he started speaking, in his character as the Indian tech support guy who's being asked to sacrifice his day off, there was a wave of laughter - led by the Indian executives.

"It was interesting, because there were Indian people who knew this culture very well, and then there were Germans and Polish and Dutch



and New Zealanders. There was a direct response in the feedback: the Indians were able to confirm the validity of the scenario.

"This manager was trying to get me to work on my day off, and I kept saying 'Yes, I realise it's very important' - but I never actually said I would be there, because it was my son's most important cricket game that day, and I wanted to go to the game to see my kid play."

Afterwards, Oscar asked the participants:

"Do you think he's going to show up?" Says Antonie: "The person who participated as the 'boss' said 'Yeah!'. But everyone else - especially the people from India - said 'No! He's being polite, but he's not going to show up!'

"It was a great experience for me, because we had people from so many different cultures, and they were able to confirm the validity of what we were acting out."

Antonie says it is extraordinary when he sees the 'light bulb moment' - when people suddenly really, viscerally understand how another culture may have utterly different values from their own.

Even with companies that routinely deal with many varying nationalities, the realisation can startle people.

"There's one scenario we do where I play an American. It's lunchtime, in a cafeteria at work, and the manager wants to know if his new American employee is happy at his new job, and how his family is, and so he asks all these personal questions."

Americans, Antonie points out, keep their personal life strictly separate from their work. "In one seminar, it was interesting to see people realise what was going on. People from the HR department were there, and they had been wondering why Americans who had very good resumes never got much further in the application rounds.

"It was because the Dutch interviewers wanted to get to know the person behind the resume, but Americans in an interview will only talk about their resume - in fact, in America the HR rules say that you can't ask about someone's age, the year they graduated or their sexual preferences. Personal questions are absolutely taboo."

The HR group realised that the result of the cultural clash had been disastrous:

The Dutch were suspicious of these closed-off American jobseekers, and the Americans were astonished and offended by the nosy Dutch interviewers.

This seminar revolutionised the Dutch HR people's thinking - now they understood that they needed to use different values in interviewing Americans. It was a classic light bulb moment.

It is intensely rewarding, Antonie says, to see people vividly understanding the cross-cultural misunderstandings, in a far stronger way than when they just talk about the known facts of intercultural competencies.

The scenarios are almost total improv, based on a skeletal structure; this gives a real chance to open out the meaning of how cultural interaction works, and how key skills are used in bridging the cultural gulfs. "You've got to be on your toes and be flexible," says Antonie. "It's exciting, a little nerve-wracking, but challenging.

It's so different from theory."

"It so energises the training, and it's so exciting to see the moment when people absolutely understand - and it's not just the people playing a part in the scenario, but also those watching who understand newly what cultural differences are. It's absolutely rewarding."

For more information about working with actors for intercultural competence development, please contact Oscar an Weerdenburg at Intercultural Business Improvement.

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