

MINDFULNESS AND ELEGANCE IN INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION

Uwe Napiersky, a renowned business psychologist, has developed an unusual method of getting multinational executives ready for their intercultural challenges. He focuses on mindfulness and elegance, an ability to wait, to listen, not to rush in but to allow the other to speak and expand first.

By Lucille Redmond

Dr Napiersky's discovery of the Intercultural Readiness Check, or IRC, a complex checklist of a person's skill set for intercultural effectiveness, enhanced his method. One client who benefited from this had worked in multiple cultures, always adapting to wear local dress and use local customs, in cultures as varied as the Middle East and the United States. She spoke seven languages, and was superbly interculturally competent — or so she thought.

The results of her IRC checklist, however, showed pitfalls and potential blind spots in her appreciation of cultural differences, and her ability to deal with them. "At first she utterly rejected this, then she began to see that the results made sense, and was able to use the insights to develop the areas where her cultural antennae were not as sensitive as she had imagined." Dr Napiersky explains, "The IRC helps you to look at four areas: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, managing intercultural uncertainty, and building commitment — which is very important in teamwork and the professional and academic settings.

"The IRC gives you a framework to sharpen your cultural antennae in those four areas. The IRC feedback opens up to you the possibilities, and the potential pitfalls, that you face."

Dr Napiersky describes his concept of elegance in behaviour as having two main characteristics: the elements of simplicity and of beauty in communication between people. "For my workshops, I have specifically designed simulation exercises where participants can simulate typical intercultural interactions in their workplace. These might be giving feedback on performance, or providing directions or targets," he says. "When people enact the interaction in a role-play, they receive feedback from peers on, for example, whether the communication appears authentic and at ease.



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"The role-plays, together with the feedback from their peers and from their Intercultural Readiness profile, help them to identify and define patterns in their behaviour in terms of elegance and simplicity, and to adapt these patterns according to the concept of cultural elasticity – where we adapt and change our approach without losing the inner structure that defines us."

Dr Napiersky is convinced that exercising elegance has a high success rate in motivating oneself and others to work together in culturally diverse teams, and in supporting intercultural readiness.

Dr Napiersky's own history gives him the background for this speciality: he grew up in Germany, but from the age of 18 he travelled the world, working in the corporate field and as an international consultant. His main area was management diagnostics: assessing the appropriateness of senior executives for their specific type of work.

At 50 Dr Napiersky moved to England with his family and joined the staff of Aston University, his clientele expanding to incorporate students who proposed to work interculturally.

In his work he has integrated the ideas and methods of Ellen Langer, a highly reputed author on occupational psychology who applies the concept of mindfulness in the classes she teaches in Harvard University. "She defines mindfulness as a kind of reflective attention. In relation to intercultural challenges, this means understanding the patterns of intercultural situations, as well as being able to postpone judgement and to deliberately build new mental perspectives," he explains.

"Langer was the first in the research of mindfulness of learning, so for me as a psychologist working on behavioural change of people, this was of high interest. Mindfulness is a kind of mindset — not to be on cruise control, but to be switched on. It's about taking control: changing from automatic to manual gears, as it were, so you know when you can cruise in fourth gear and when you need to change to second gear."

As an analogy that underlines the intentional self-leadership skills needed, Dr Napiersky cites an example to illustrate Langer's idea of building new mental categories to break old habits: "Soon after an elephant is born in captivity, it is bound to a stake to keep it from wandering. In the first three years of its life it will pull on the stake around 10,000 times. Then it becomes resigned to the impossibility of escape."

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“After the elephant has grown up, it harks back to its memory from these first three years — a memory that now keeps it from dragging at the stake. After those many trials, it has persuaded itself unconsciously that escape is impossible.

“Many humans have elephant-sized cognitive habits. We have given up trying to build new perspectives or refresh old ones. However, when we become mindful self-leaders, we learn to continually ‘drag the stake’. We know what our elephant-sized habits are — and mindful techniques in intercultural interactions help us to break away from them, to form new behaviours. Mindful self-leaders pull up the stake of habit.”

Dr Napiersky adds: "As humans, we encounter different cultures, and we need to enhance our antennae, to be able to sense when change is necessary: you may need to switch, to regulate yourself differently in talking to five-year-olds and with adults, to talk to your IT expert, to the city council, to my 85-year-old mother."

He calls the concept of mindfulness "a tool to bring people into a more reflective mode — to help them to learn when to operate on cruise control, and when they must be on full alert".

"Sometimes the deepest lesson is that there is not only one way that leads to success — your American individualism or your Chinese team spirit. To postpone judgment is an element of mindfulness, and an element in meeting others."

Upcoming dates for our IRC programs 2017:

Berlin: June 29 and 30 (Thu-Fri) Early Bird ends April 21, 2017

August – Online Early Bird ends June 15

Sydney: September 27 and 28 (Wed-Thu) Early Bird ends July 15

Amsterdam: September 27 and 28 (Wed-Thu) Early Bird ends July 15

Amsterdam: December 7 and 8 (Thu-Fri) Early Bird ends October 15

For more information on Intercultural Readiness, please visit www.ibinet.nl and www.interculturalreadiness.com or contact us directly via info@ibinet.nl. We look forward to hearing from you!

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