



Values Based Leadership

Developing Inspirational Leaders

RE-SPECT: the key to cultural intelligence

by Pellegrino Riccardi

It all started in an elevator

Culture boils down to three simple words: WHAT, HOW, and WHY? The culture of any given group of people is *what* they do, *how* they do it, and *why* they do it.

The *what* and the *how* are relatively easy to work out. The *what* and the *how* are concrete and visible, at least to the trained and informed eye. The *what* and the *how* are typically the type of things you would find in cultural “Dos and Don’t” lists, things like how to hand over business cards, gift-giving etiquette, greetings, listening habits, and so forth, and they are absolutely useful things to know. But what I find really separates the wheat from the chaff when it comes to cultural intelligent people, is understanding the *why*.

Here’s an exercise I use in my cultural awareness workshops. Imagine you are waiting for the elevator on the ground floor of a public building. In fact, there are two elevator doors. Standing next to you is another person who is also waiting for the elevator. You do not know that person. Suddenly, both elevator doors open at the same time. The person standing next to you takes the *left-hand elevator*. Which one do you take, the same one, or the other one?

I have been asking this question to my fellow Norwegians for the last ten years.

The vast majority of Norwegians say that they would take the OTHER elevator. This pattern of behaviour has changed little in the last ten years, a pattern that is repeated in the other Scandinavian countries. However, when I ask the same question to workshop participants in countries such as India, or Brazil, the response is very different, most people in these countries opting to take the same elevator.

I then tell my Norwegian audiences that the person who took the elevator was actually me. It was an episode that happened to me during my first year after I moved to Norway. I was the one who took the elevator. And yes, the Norwegian behind me took the other elevator that time too, even though I attempted to invite him in to my elevator by holding the door open for him by dangling my leg in front of the infrared door sensors and smiling at him.

At this point, the Norwegian audiences offer me a number of explanations for their fellow Norwegian’s behaviour.

“He probably thought you didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“He thought you preferred to take your own elevator.”



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And my personal favourite ...

"It's much more efficient if you take your elevator and he takes his, then there is no need to stop unnecessarily to let one of you get out. After all, Norway has lots of elevators and only 5 million inhabitants so there are plenty of elevators to go round!"

What characterises all of the explanations is that they all have as their basis some kind of POSITIVE INTENTION. It is the positive intention that is the WHY of a particular behaviour. What is interesting is that at the time of the incident, I did not see any of these positive intentions. All I saw was a strange, antisocial and rather cold individual.

The positive intention of the man who took the other elevator is the Nordic need for a lot of personal space. This makes a lot of sense in a country that has the same surface area as France and yet whose population is no more than that of Munich.

By recognising and identifying the positive intention, as well as describing other people's "strange" behaviour in a positive way, you end up with a world view whereby Norwegians don't "ignore" you in elevators, but rather they "show respect by allowing you a larger than average space bubble."

Similarly, Norwegian managers are not, as one Brazilian colleague said to me once, "distant and somewhat laissez-faire with their management style", but rather they "believe in empowering their employees by allowing them a sense of space and flexibility in order to manage their tasks as

they see fit". They even have a name for this in Norwegian: "*frihet under ansvar*" (Responsible Freedom).

Similarly, a typical Japanese audience will not be "unresponsive and disinterested" when you hold a sales presentation but they will be "listening intently without interrupting you." While we are on the subject of paying attention, I once gave a presentation in Guangzhou in southern China to a small group of ship inspectors where one of the older members of the audience actually fell asleep! Try and put a positive spin on that one.

Well, as it turned out there was indeed a positive intention, at least initially. Apparently, that older gentleman was present at the meeting purely as a sign of respect for me for the fact that I had come all that way to give an important presentation. He was also there to rubber stamp the process this meeting was part of. By closing his eyes, he was signalling to everyone that he would not be an active, speaking participant of the meeting. Of course, if you do that in the middle of the afternoon after lunch and you happen to be tired, there is a high risk of you falling asleep.

The challenge comes in actually identifying the positive intention – the rationale, the *why* – behind a behaviour. However, even if you can't initially see the positive intention, look for it. It is there somewhere. The strategy I use is to ask. As long as one asks a question *with curiosity* and a willingness to learn - as opposed to



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asking with underlying prejudice - you can ask almost any question.

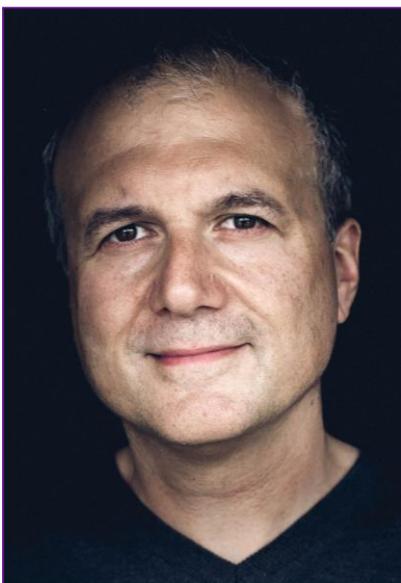
I once sat to dinner next to an Omani business associate who I'd been told had two wives. The person who had told me was clearly very disapproving of this practice. During dinner, after we had gotten to know each other a little I started asking this Omani gentleman about his family. He avoided mentioning his two wives.

So, with all the curiosity I could muster up, I told him that I had heard that he had two wives. I then asked him what it was like to have two wives. The Omani looked right into my eyes, thought a little, and then said: "Expensive!" We both laughed out loud. I spent the rest of the evening learning about the huge responsibilities of

a man who had two families and nine children to support. It was a real eye-opener, I can tell you.

What I have learnt in my cross-cultural work, and what I encourage people on my workshops to do, is to be curious enough to explore what positive intentions lie behind even the most frustrating or baffling of behaviours in people from other cultures. I encourage people to take a new perspective, to hold back on their personal opinions and beliefs and instead try to understand the motivations and rationale behind the actions of people from other cultures.

In effect, I encourage people to look, look, and look again. Did you know, by the way, that the word *respect* comes from Latin and means *to look again*?



By Pellegrino Riccardi,

Pellegrino Riccardi was raised in an Italian family in the Roman City of Bath in the UK. For the past 20 years, he has been living with his Norwegian wife and three blonde children in Norway. Pellegrino runs his own company, and is a highly sought-after global keynote speaker and course instructor within the field of cross-cultural interactions.