

7 Habits of Cross-Cultural Experts

by Louise Rasmussen - March 15, 2012

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If you're among the increasing number of people who traverse the globe to make a living or fulfill your life's mission, you can learn from cross-cultural experts. What is cross-cultural [expertise](#)?

Cross-cultural experts can understand and engage people from a wide variety of cultures to achieve their goals, even when they do not have deep cultural knowledge of the area they are in. That is, cross-cultural experts have achieved a high level of [cultural competence](#).

And if they can do it, so can you. Cultural competence is a journey, not a destination. In other words, it's not something you're born with or without. Instead, cross-cultural competence comes from a set of skills that you can develop and refine over time.

So, if you're a modern day global nomad, how can you start building [cross-cultural competence](#) today?

Adopt 7 simple habits of cross-cultural experts.

[Louise Rasmussen](#) and [Winston Sieck](#) of Global Cognition have conducted several studies of cross-cultural experts to uncover their strategies. In one study, they interviewed a sample of highly regarded U.S. military professionals who had lived and worked in many different cultures. The researchers looked at how these cross-cultural experts handled challenging interactions with people overseas. They published their paper, "[Strategies for Developing and Practicing Cross-Cultural Expertise](#)," in *Military Review*.

Rasmussen and Sieck identified 7 strategies that had enabled the cross-cultural experts to build competence. These are:

1. *Know yourself—and how you're different:* Be aware that you see the world in a certain way because of your background, personal history, and culture. Everybody brings their own perspective to a situation. Understanding how others perceive you can give you an advantage.
2. *Know the value of a little cultural understanding:* Understand why it's important to learn even a little about a culture. Focus on what you need to know to accomplish your goals while you're abroad. Don't feel you need to know 'everything' about a culture. That frees you up to research the things you're really interested in.
3. *Frame intercultural interactions as opportunities to learn:* Expect to continue to learn new things about a culture the whole time you are in it. Treat every new tidbit you digest as a tool to learn more.
4. *Pay attention to surprises:* Be alert to actions that you find puzzling. Like a [good scientist](#), inquire into the cause of unexpected behavior. If something or somebody offends you or gets offended, that's a good cue to ask "why did they do that?" This is one of several [metacognitive strategies](#) or "mental habits" you can use to gain deep insight into new cultures.
5. *Test your knowledge:* Expect that only a small amount of what have been told about the culture is

true. If you think you know something about a culture, ask a native. They'll be amused and you might learn a thing or two.

6. *Reflect on your experiences:* Continue to think about your experiences after they happened. There's value in doing a play-by-play analysis, especially if something about it just gives you a 'weird feeling.' (See point 4.)
7. *Adapt what you express and how you express it:* Use your understanding of a culture to decide how to express yourself to accomplish your goals. Plan how you want to say things. Importantly, adapt the strategies you use to fit your own personality. Being genuine is key. Pretending to be someone you're not doesn't win you any points.

Interacting with people who are different is stressful for most people. So, don't worry if you don't think of yourself as the 'culturally sensitive' type. You don't have to be sensitive to build [cross-cultural competence](#). You just have to be able to figure out where to start.

Having strategies for learning about other cultures will reduce your uncertainty, improve your interactions, and give you a starting point for adapting to any new culture.

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