

WORKING WITH "CULTURES OF SIMILARITY": Managing the Hidden Differences Between the US, Canada, the UK and Australia.

By Dean Foster

There's an oft-quoted statistic that the country from which the US has the highest number of failed expatriate assignments is.....the UK. It is oft-quoted precisely because it is counter-intuitive and always surprising. After all, how can it be that two countries that appear to be so culturally similar, that have so much in common (such as a mutual language – more or less – and a shared history that binds), can produce an experience that for at least the US-Americans going to the UK (by the way, it is not the same in reverse) can be so problematic that a significant number of those Americans simply do not complete their international assignment? Admittedly, this is a bit of a skewed statistic, for it refers to the *absolute* number of expatriates (and the US sends more expatriates to the UK per annum than to any other individual country), and not to the highest *percentage* of failed assignments (as measured by early returns), but nevertheless, there is something critical to be learned from this statistic: that cultures that share significant aspects of similarity can present an even greater challenge for expatriate adjustment, admittedly in a different kind of way and for different reasons, than would cultures of clear and extreme difference. We culturalists call this phenomenon: the danger of "cultures of similarity", where the similarities that exist between cultures tend to mask over any differences, and where similarities may appear to be so much greater than any differences, so that the differences are either ignored or dismissed...and consequently, never really dealt with. Instead, these differences are left to fester, under the surface, and usually reveal themselves, to everyone's surprise and despite all the apparent similarities on the surface, in a frustrating business or relocation experience, often to the point of sending the family home, itself a bit mystified as to what exactly went so wrong in a culture that felt, at first, so right.

This, of course, is on one level, a problem of expectations. If we are relocating to or working with a culture that is clearly different in obvious and perceivable ways, then our antennae are already tuned to expect and deal with every little difference that comes along. At first, we may even find such differences charming and exciting to deal with. And when they become annoying and problematic, as they usually

ultimately do, we are still not surprised by this turn of events. However, when we relocate to or work in a culture of similarity, our antennae are on pause mode, we don't expect differences, so that when these differences do emerge, they do so to everyone's surprise, and are that much more irritating. If Americans, for example, are assigned to India, the assumption usually is that there will be lots of difference to deal with, and therefore surprises are themselves, well, not surprising. However, when Americans are assigned to the UK, the assumption more typically is that there aren't any real differences, and those that are, are small and insignificant (just a difference in "accent", as opposed to actual language, for example). If the expectation of difference is great, we are steeled to try to deal with them; if the expectation of difference is low, we tend to be surprised by them, and often manage them badly. A basic intercultural rule is that similarities don't make the problems, differences do. Therefore, even if the cultural difference is small, say only 10% (as might be the case between the US and Canada, for example), as opposed to great, say 80% (as might be the case between the US and India, for example), it's not the 90% that makes us the same that will create problems: it is the 10% difference that keeps us misunderstanding each other that makes the problems. Sure the US and Canada have more in common than that which separates them. Much more, in fact. Nevertheless, if we overlook even the small 5% or 10% that does define the difference between US and Canadian culture, we are sure to be overlooking precisely those key issues that are the source of whatever cultural difficulties do emerge between these two cultures. Cultures of similarity, in fact, have an insidious ability to cause real problems, precisely because the differences are usually fewer, more subtle, and easily masked. But they are real nonetheless, and if ignored, can undermine an otherwise successful international transfer or business relationship just as easily as if the situation were between two cultures of obvious difference. Perhaps even moreso.

CANADIANS AND AMERICANS. NO DIFFERENCES, EH?

It has been said that there is no difference between Americans and Canadians, and the only way to tell the two apart is to make that statement to a Canadian. Once again, the overwhelming similarities mask the few, but real, differences. If problems emerge when Canadians and Americans work with each other, these differences usually revolve, as all cultural differences do, around the influence of history, topography, climate and religion on the values, and subsequently on the business behaviors, of both countries.

A classic complaint, for example, by Americans is that Canadians are unresponsive to their needs, ideas, requirements, etc. The Canadian perspective, of course, is that the Americans are ignorant of the way things need to be done in Canada and assume that they can just export the way they do it in Tampa into Toronto. Often associated with this perception is the American frustration with what they view to be Canadian resistance, or foot-dragging to new American ideas which Americans are sure to be successful and beneficial if only the Canadians would "get on board"; the Canadian perspective is that Americans are constantly "pushing the envelope", "over-the-top", and advocating a change-based agenda when it is not necessary, unproven or downright unproductive. If we look at the historical, religious and even topographical realities of both countries, however, these different business perspectives become less mysterious: for example, the US had a violent revolution against the "mother ship" (the UK), and has nurtured values of individualism, change and future-orientation, and most importantly, the benefits to be gained by constantly challenging limits, authority, barriers and frontiers. It should be no surprise that these American values developed in a country that succeeded in a sudden, violent act to free itself from an unwanted master, and which existed in a moderate, temperate climate. In the developing US, the physical frontier yielded to hard work, which could be accomplished by a lone individual, in many cases. The indigenous civilization, being nomadic and unorganized, also yielded to the advancing European power. Frontiers were things to be overcome, not limits that defined and constrained individual action. And perhaps most importantly, those founding British revolutionaries were advancing a religious agenda that was, in its day, radical and fundamentalist, a puritan interpretation of Christianity that empowered each individual to determine their own salvation, independent of religious hierarchies; this idea was so challenging to the Anglican establishment in Britain in its day, that these "pilgrims" had to cross an ocean to advance their new and unique vision.

This was not the case on Canada. Canada had no sudden and violent revolution against Britain. Canada, on the other hand, slowly and carefully, with mindful and cautious deliberation, legislated itself into independent existence, more or less, from Britain. The Queen after all is still pictured on the "loonie" (the Canadian dollar bill). Canada is still a member of the British Commonwealth. The founding settlers of what was to become Canada were not violent revolutionaries on a puritanical mission to advance a particularly individualist notion of accountability (and ultimately, therefore, of personal worth and

(settlers in the US colonies who did not want to join the Patriot cause in the US revolution often packed their bags and moved north to Canada), and Anglicans in their devotion to the less-than-puritan Church of England. (Please note: we are speaking only of Anglophone Canada: the Quebecois French experience is different, and presents a "culture-of-similarity" phenomenon only when comparing Quebecois with their French cousins in France!).

Most importantly, Canadian settlers were living in a topographical reality that prevented individuals from challenging limits and frontiers: in the vast north of Canada, the Great Canadian Shield, that topographical feature of wild and frozen tundra, prevents individuals from acting independently on their own, and does not nurture the valuing of overcoming limits and frontiers. In fact, in Canada, limits and barriers are to be respected, for there is no overcoming them easily. Individualism yields to the need to collaborate with others if one is to survive, to build an orderly society based on the collective good for all, rather than a society whose first priority is the guarantee of individual rights. This can be seen no more clearly today than by standing on the riverbank that divides Windsor, Ontario, from Detroit Michigan. Depending on which side of the river you are standing, you are either viewing a rather orderly, somewhat unexciting, but certainly civil society on one side, and the raucous and over-the-top complexity of a very different society on the other side. Depending on your viewpoint, both have their pluses and minuses, and interestingly, the minuses are exactly the same complaints that one hears by either side when they attempt to work together.

"GOD SAVE OUR GRACIOUS KING", "MY COUNTRY TIS OF THEE..."(same song, different lyrics)

If the subtle and few, yet real and problematic, differences between Canadians and Americans can derail even the best-intentioned business deal, then imagine what can happen when Americans and Britons try to get on with each other. Britain is, after all, the mother ship against which Americans had their revolution. Therefore, it is important to recognize that those same differences which drew both the colonies and the UK into violent confrontation with each other are often at the invisible source of much of the misunderstanding that can sometimes emerge when Americans and Britons attempt to work with each other. Sure we have unique historical, political and linguistic ties that bind, especially in the face of larger, more definitively different world. But those few, historically rooted differences, can be

against the imposition of authority, hierarchy and ascribed privilege: in short, aristocracy, Kings and Queens. In its stead, the US developed a culture that valued the everyman, that empowered individuals based on their competency, not their class. And while it is true that Britain also shares a strong democratic tradition (the Magna Carta, after all, over one thousand years ago, began the tradition of devolving kingly authority to what would eventually become a representative Parliament), Britain still simultaneously has rigorously held on to its aristocratic lineage: it is today still one of the world's oldest and remaining monarchies, and the society runs, in many key ways, based on class and privilege. When these traditions clash with American individual empowerment traditions, Americans and Britons often experience a profound disconnect, which can reveal itself in day-to-day business interactions. For example, Americans often complain about British business meetings being events where their input is sometimes less than welcomed, and where individuals are less than forthright with their thoughts and opinions in front of others at the table. On the other hand, Britons often complain that American meetings are merely brainstorming sessions, where individuals appear to compete with each other at the table for the position of "who-said-most", while not really advancing anything. The conflict between these two very different styles, indeed purposes, of business meetings, is based on two very different perspectives of hierarchy, and the roles of individuals toward hierarchy. As we stated, British meetings can be solution-oriented, where all individuals are expected to contribute to a decision, but often this style occurs in Britain only when the individuals around the table are peers; once authority enters the room, individual initiative often stops dead. In the US, it is precisely because authority enters the room that individuals enter into a competition to appear as if they are contributing to solutions to the problem which prompted the meeting in the first place.

Not to mention the difficulties and misunderstandings surrounding the English language! George Bernard Shaw once stated that Americans and Britons are cousins separated by a common language, and the myriad number of differences between American and British English can fill many a book (and many have been written about it!). For example, when a Briton says, "let's table this idea", the American assumes they want to put the topic aside for discussion at a later time; however, in Briton, to table something means to bring it forward for discussion now. Precisely the opposite meaning than in the US. But that should not be surprising, given the fact that Americans had a revolution once against all things British (and European). It is for this

Americans dine by switching their knife and fork precisely because Britons, when dining, keep their knife and fork in the same hands; that Americans drive on the right, because Britons drive on the left; that Americans date their correspondence "month-day-year" precisely because Britons dated their correspondence (and still do, along with most all Europeans) "day-month-year"; and that Americans will flash the "V-for-victory" sign with abandon (even if only to order two more beers), while Britons are careful to always and only perform this gesture with the palm facing outward (when the palm faces inward, it becomes a very rude gesture of defiant hostility). "Baseball English", so common in America ("give me a ballpark figure", "that idea is from left field", "step up to the plate", and on and on), is completely lost on most Brits, just as "cricket English" ("sticky wicket", "not just cricket", etc.) sounds odd and arcane to the Yank's ear. The two cultures constantly step on each other's language toes, often to the detriment of a good business relationship.

WATCH OUT FOR THOSE TALL POPPIES DOWN UNDER!

And if the American can appear all too casual, and individually unaware of the importance of rank, privilege and class, imagine the difficulties that they can experience when working with their Australian counterparts in the land of "the tall poppy". As explained universally in Australia, poppy flowers can individually grow to many different heights, some are short, some are tall. But tall poppies get their heads cut off in Australia, meaning that anyone who appears (or thinks and acts as if they are) more important, or taller, than anyone else, in the end will get their head cut off, and be cut down to size. Modern Australia, after all, was founded by the cast-offs of British society, who all shared the same rank and status, that of prisoners of her Majesty. It should be no surprised, therefore, that the society that developed from these humble beginnings would be one that devalues any kind of behavior that reinforces ideas of rank, status and ascribed authority. In Australia, anyone who tries to "pull rank", who puts themselves and their agenda above anyone else's, is immediately undermined, undercut, and a target on a pedestal to be knocked down.

Australians usually do this "cutting-the-tall-poppy-down-to-size" maneuver in a number of ways: through joking, through disregarding, and sometimes, through direct confrontation. One way or the other, however, Americans often find themselves going to Australia with the goal of advancing their own business agenda, only to be received by Australians who's first priority is to knock you down to size...and only

(and when "Jack's as good as his master", as we say in Australia) do we take a closer look at the Yank's agenda. Rugged individualism also takes a different form in Australia, in a land so forbidding that 95% of the population lives within 100 miles of the coastline, and where almost nobody lived in the interior (the "outback"). In this very challenging physical environment, everyone needs a "mate", someone they can rely on, someone who is no better nor worse than they, who is dependable and trustworthy. Going it alone is downright foolish, less than productive, and can be dangerous. Becoming a mate, therefore, is often a first priority as well for the Australian, while getting the task accomplished in the least amount of time is often the first objective of the American. Take the time in Australia to "throw another prawn on the Barbie", host a "shout" (pay for a round of drinks at the pub), and become a "mate" on an equal basis with your Australian counterparts, before jumping into that all-important agenda.

WHEN THE WORLD MAP WAS PINK

In the 18th and 19th centuries, much of the world was dominated by the British Empire, represented in maps of the day by the color pink. "The sun never sets on the British Empire", so the saying went, and by virtue of this colonial phenomenon, English became a lingua franca in many locations around the world. Today, one of the legacies of the British colonial experience is the use of English as a world language of convenience – enhanced and globalized by the American presence on the world stage in the 20th and 21st centuries – in many countries, beyond just the US, Australia, Canada, and, of course, the UK. In the global business community most anywhere, English is the language of mutual comprehension that is often used, and in former British colonies, beyond those of Australia, Canada and the US, such as Singapore, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, and many other nations, English – or some form of a heavily Anglicized local language – forms the spoken local word. Many of these cultures beyond Canada, the US and Australia, are very different in many fundamental ways from Canada, the US, Australia and the UK, which share an essentially Anglo-Saxon culture and view of the world, in addition to a similar language. Singapore, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, may all share the influence of English on their local languages, but their fundamental cultures are far from Anglo-Saxon. So the differences that exist between Americans and Malaysians, for example, are significant enough that both Americans and Malaysians will not typically mistake each other for a "culture of similarity". despite any

and the UK, Americans share, in addition to language, the additional commonality of an Anglo-Saxon culture, and for this reason, the subtle dynamics of “cultures of similarity” need to be seriously considered. To do less would be to invite surprising, unexpected, and therefore, even more challenging, difficulties than those one might expect with cultures more clearly perceived as “different”. Our similarities don’t make for our problems: it is our differences, even when they are few, and subtle, as they often are, when working in “cultures of similarity”.

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