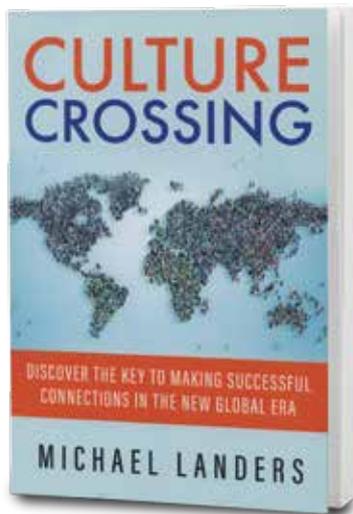


culture crossing: discover the key to making successful connections in the new global era

by michael landers



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How culture shapes our thoughts and behaviors

When you ask a five-year-old kid from the United States what a dog says, he or she will probably say “woof-woof” or “bow-wow.” Ask a kid living in Japan, and you’re likely to get a “wan-wan.” Try it in Iran, and you’ll hear “hauv-hauv.” In Laos they say “voon-voon.” It’s “gong-gong” in Indonesia and “mung-mung” in Korea.

Besides being a fun bit of knowledge to share at a dinner party, animal sounds are a good example of how people from different cultures are programmed from an early age to interpret the same experiences in different ways. It also underscores how culturally specific perceptions can get deeply lodged in our brains. Imagine if you suddenly had to convince yourself that your dog was saying “voon-voon.” Unless you are from Laos, it would probably take a while.

Here’s another example: think about how you indicate yes and no without using words. For most people in the United States, the answer is simple: nodding your head up and down means “yes,” and turning your head left and right means “no.” In

Bulgaria, however, nodding your head up and down means “no,” and turning your head left and right means “yes”!

Just for fun, here’s a challenge for you, to test your own programming: try answering the following two questions with a nonverbal “yes” or “no,” but do it the Bulgarian way, turning your head side to side for “yes,” and up and down for “no.”

Do you want to win the lottery?

Would you pay \$100 for a hamburger?

For most people, answering these questions is probably more challenging than you expected it to be. After hearing, seeing, believing, or doing anything a particular way throughout your whole life, it can be extremely difficult to change the way you act, react, or perceive someone else’s behaviors. It’s all a result of programming, some of which is biologically hardwired and some of which is based on our experiences. Your cultural programming comprises various combinations of values, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors—and it plays a large role in shaping our identities, providing us

with instructions for how to navigate our lives.

In our earliest years we're taught things like language, manners, societal do's and don'ts, punishable behaviors, and what sound a dog makes. As our cultural programming continues to accrue and be reinforced over our lifetimes, it manifests in the way we make decisions, problem solve, perceive time, build trust, communicate, buy and sell, and even how we die.

Some of our cultural programming has been handed down to us by ancestors who lived thousands of years ago, but our programming is also continuously rewritten by contemporary communities, seeking to make sense of outdated programming in a modern context. We as individuals have the choice to adapt our personal programming to new scenarios and surroundings, or not. It's the technological equivalent of updating your operating system. If you don't perform the update, your functionality may be compromised.

Despite the profound ways in which culture influences our personas, most of us are barely aware of it—that is, until we encounter people whose cultural programming is different from ours. Our minds—our personal operating systems—may freeze up and crash just as

our electronic devices do. Instead of manifesting as a frozen screen, it causes us to feel uncomfortable, perplexed, and frustrated. We may shut down, explode with emotion, or simply give up and walk away—thereby missing out on opportunities to build positive relations and achieve success at work and in other aspects of our lives. I call these kinds of encounters culture crashes.

When culture crashes happen, it is often a result of unconscious incompetence. More simply put: “You don't know what you don't know.” Acknowledging that you are in the dark is actually the first step to increasing your self-awareness and avoiding the kind of “crash” just described. It means you are ready to open your mind to things you may never have considered before.

Some of our behaviors are modeled on those we have seen or heard, like how to make animal noises or indicate yes or no. But there are hundreds, if not thousands of other more nuanced behaviors whose cultural origins are less apparent. These are things like how close you usually stand to a friend or colleague while talking, how promptly you show up for a party or business function, or whether and when you look someone in the eye.

While some of these habits can be chalked up to individual personality

or experience, many of them are rooted in culture. For example, when I ask people from the United States what makes someone seem trustworthy to them, one of the most common answers is: “Someone who looks me directly in the eye.” So when someone doesn't look them in the eye, they immediately begin to question whether or not this person is trustworthy.

In many Western cultures, direct eye contact is viewed as a sign of respect and expected between people of all ages and genders. But in parts of Thailand, Oman, and Japan, direct eye contact is often construed as a sign of disrespect, especially between genders and people of different ages.

I can clearly remember my first experience with eye contact confusion when I moved to Japan to teach English in my early twenties. I was struck by how practically none of my students would look me in the eye, even those who were significantly older than I was. In the United States, this would have been construed as a sign of disrespect, but in Japan, avoiding eye contact with your teachers is a show of deference. I tried to train my students to look me in the eye when speaking English, and they eventually got the hang of it. Meanwhile, I was busy trying to retrain myself to avoid the eyes of my Japanese martial arts master. It was much more challenging than I anticipated. ■

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