

JIM MORRIS & SYLLA PAHLADSINGH

# THE EIGHT GREAT BEACONS OF CULTURAL AWARENESS

NAVIGATING THE CULTURAL  
LANDSCAPE



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# FOREWORD

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'Culture' was the most popular word in Merriam Webster's dictionary in 2014, so any guide to help us interpret and deal with culture is welcome. Sylla and Jim's metaphor of *beacons* - with its dual sense of dangers and opportunities - is an apt one.

Beacons were an early but fast and effective form of sending important messages. In the world of today, we are drowning in myriads of ways of communicating – email, texts, instant messaging, Skype, Twitter, WebEx, Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Hangouts, WeChat, video conferencing, even talking holograms. It is easier and cheaper than ever to keep in touch across the globe.

And accelerating cross-border mergers and acquisitions, the globalisation of media and entertainment and political unions are leading to the Flat World described by Thomas L. Friedman in his bestselling 2005 book.

But people and cultures change slowly. Getting under the skin of other cultures (and your own!) and understanding how to make the most of diversity is a 'must-have' skill if you work, or are going to be working, internationally. And that doesn't necessarily mean leaving your desk.

The competitive edge to be gained from 'linearity' – being good at tasks, R&D, production, logistics, IT etc. – is diminishing fast. In the end, a lot of the linear stuff can be outsourced to a computer.

Cross-cultural people, relationship skills and competency will distinguish the successful managers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And the eight beacons described in this book are a great way to start your journey.

Too often, cultural guides stick to the easy formula of 'dos and don'ts', at the surface. What I particularly like about this book is that it goes below that surface without ever becoming overly academic. It is both practical and deep.

It is those deep cultural undercurrents that are so fascinating – the migration of Europeans to the Americas hundreds of years ago – forming the North and South American cultures. The prior migration tens of thousands

of years ago from Central Asia, over the Bering Land Bridge – bringing cultural traits to parts of South America that are still there today.

And intellectual movements, such as the rise of Rationalism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, embodied in Descartes, which ultimately led to the Industrial Revolution and the triumph of logic and reason as the drivers of economic growth worldwide. Or the rejection of absolute truths and logic brought in by philosophers such as Herder or poets like Blake.

Examining the history of thought can help us truly put ourselves in the shoes of other cultures and understand more profoundly what is going on. For instance, at a cultural level, the divisions about the purpose of the EU could be seen as a battle between Platonic idealism and Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and the current stance on corruption by the Chinese government is guided by their President's desire to return to traditional Chinese virtues as expounded by Confucius and Lao Tzu.

And what of the future, as international mobility merges cultures as never before? I recently had a student who was native Jamaican, adopted by an Irish Jewish father and a Cuban mother and raised in Harlem, New York!

Some would argue that generalisations will become less useful as the cultural mix gets more complex. But I believe the opposite is true. The more complex things become, the more important it is to be guided. The concepts of being Jamaican, Irish, Jewish, Cuban and a Harlem New Yorker do not disappear because they are mingled, any more than the colour purple negates the existence of blue and red.

Generalisations about cultures are 'working hypotheses', or falsifications which are our best guide until a more accurate hypothesis – or the reality of an individual – replaces them.

I am sure you will learn a lot about other cultures from this guide, but even more about yourself and your own culture. And that is how it should be.

The important thing is then to act. Beacons are not just dazzling enlightenments but calls to action, lit by those who know the way. Jim and Sylla certainly know their way around culture.

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Helsinki, 26 October 2015

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# WHEN FACE MEETS TRUTH... WHEN IS A YES A YES?

“Isn’t the best way to save face to keep  
the lower part shut?” *STEVEN WRIGHT*



## THE WORLD HAS MANY DIFFERENT FACES

In this chapter, the face we will refer to is not one which can be washed or shaved but one which can be given or lost. Origins of the concept of face vary, but it is believed to have its roots in Chinese culture. We have certainly experienced loss-of-face situations in China, as Jim's experience whilst working there shows.

**M**y Dutch colleagues and I were working in the busy metropolis of Chengdu, a city of about sixteen million people. We were fortunate enough to have a driver who would pick us up every morning to take us to work and in the late afternoon take us back to our hotel. If you are in the middle of the rush hour in the city, you could be forgiven for thinking that all sixteen million are in or on some form of vehicle. Roads quickly become a block of slow moving metal and rubber, as cars and motorbikes form twisting traffic jams which can tail back for several kilometres. It was therefore not much of a surprise that one afternoon our driver was not there to pick us up at the allocated time. We rang our English speaking contact to ask where our driver was. She told us that she understood our concern and would ring us back. Sure enough in a few minutes she called and explained that our

driver was "just around the corner". We nodded agreement between ourselves that this probably meant he'd arrive in five minutes or so.

Forty-five minutes later our driver showed up. He had indeed been just around the corner - just not a corner anywhere near us.

It was clear to us that he had probably been in a traffic jam. It became equally clear, however, that this information could not be given to us. It could be seen as our hosts having failed to do what was expected and therefore a cause for loss of face. The exact time our driver would show up was probably not known. It was certainly not discussed and rather than give us an estimate which might even be longer than it might take the driver to show up, we were told he was "just around the corner". A safe answer and certainly not a lie.

Cultural awareness consists to a large extent of realising that your own cultural norms and values are valid and that you should not abandon them. Yet to be effective in communication with somebody from another culture, it may well be useful for you to adapt your style of communication to make things more effective or less frustrating for yourself. Your core values remain but you allow small changes in how you approach communication with another culture. This is most effective when protecting or giving face.



This principle is further illustrated by the story of Sanjay - an Indian IT expert who was sent to the US for three months to work in a team led by an American manager. Sanjay told us that he is well aware of his cultural identity and had already expected this to be a challenge whilst working in America. Often he found himself confronted with “face” situations in which, wanting to avoid a loss of face for himself or his manager, he felt pushed into a corner - unable to give a complete and clear answer.

Sanjay experienced his manager as fairly direct, task oriented and very concerned with bringing in projects on time. Sanjay wanted to do his best for the company and yet faced difficult remarks from his manager about “vague” replies. “Is that a real yes, Sanjay, or just your way of saying no?”. His American manager clearly knew about the concept of face but would still often take what was for Sanjay a very confrontational approach, saying things like “OK, Sanjay, if you did understand me, repeat back what I just said.” This made Sanjay feel very uncomfortable.

Both Sanjay and his manager wanted to communicate well, but their different cultures were working against them.

Sanjay knew in his heart that he would struggle to meet deadlines, but rather than confront his manager with the whole truth he would opt to keep the harmony in their relationship by answering that he would “try my best to get things done on time” and that he and the team “should be able to meet targets”. In Sanjay’s words, he never felt he was given enough “space” from his American manager. Closed questions such as “Do you expect problems, Sanjay?” or “Have you understood me?” left Sanjay feeling he had little room to say how he really felt.

When we asked Sanjay how he would like to be approached, he told us, “I know what I am doing and that I am competent in my job. However, if I have not entirely understood what my manager has explained to me, I may not admit to this as this reflects poorly on me (I lose face). I feel I should understand, I set myself high standards in my work and I want to achieve and grow with the company. I have real ambition in my work. Also if I said I had not understood, I feel I would implicitly be saying to my manager that he is not good at explaining things.”

“I feel completely engulfed by my manager. What I want is the feeling of space in our discussions so that I have room to reply and also ask questions.

If my manager changed his style of communication just slightly, he would give me this space. I am sure this would give me the courage to be a little more assertive as well. A simple example would be if he used open questions. Instead of asking me “Do you expect any problems?” to which my answer would be a safe “No” to avoid any possible break in harmony and relationship, a question such as “What possible problems could we encounter, Sanjay?” would be much better.”

We started this chapter by saying that it is generally accepted that the concept of “face” originated in China, in which country we should do our utmost to save face. It is therefore quite surprising that this concept has been so extremely reversed in recent times to ensure face is lost.

One of the most popular television programmes in China in recent times called “Interviews Before Execution” promoted the public shame and humiliation of Chinese prisoners confessing their crimes and begging forgiveness before being led away to their executions. These interviews on death row were originally planned as propaganda to deter would-be criminals. Instead it became a hugely successful prime-time show in China with a devoted following of forty-plus million viewers, as recounted in the article below.

**H**aving begun life five years ago on a TV channel in Henan province in central China, “Interviews Before Execution” quickly became a hit with viewers and was given a prime time Saturday night slot.

The scenes are recorded sometimes minutes before the prisoners are put to death, or in other cases when only days of their life remain.

The interviewer conducts face-to-face interviews with the prisoners, who have often committed especially gruesome crimes. Her subjects sit in handcuffs and leg chains, guarded by warders. Initial questions are about favourite films or music, but the interviewer moves swiftly on to questions about the violent details of their crimes and eventually wrings apologies out of them.

The cameras keep rolling as the condemned say a farewell message and are led away to be killed by firing squad or lethal injection.

In one scene, a prisoner in his 20s falls to his knees in front of his parents, who have been allowed to see him. He pleads: “Father, I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Moments later, as he is about to be led away to his death, his distraught mother apologises for beating him once as a child and then says: “Go peacefully. It’s following government’s orders.”

Officials in the ruling Communist Party regard the series as a propaganda tool to warn citizens of the consequences of crime.

The programme makers argue that the show is not exploitative: “Some viewers might consider it cruel to ask a criminal to do an interview when they are about to be executed. On the contrary, they want to be heard. The aim of the show was not to entertain but to ‘inform and educate according to government policy.’”

*DailyMail.co.uk, March 2012*

The above article from a UK paper shows how powerful the shame of publicly losing one's face can be in a country such as China. Understanding the cultural consequence of face in business today must help us manage the needs of our multicultural teams more effectively. Without losing sight of deadlines, quality and the need to give each other feedback, the culturally aware manager or team member will succeed by being face sensitive where others may fail.

Photo 2.  
The uncle of Kim Jong-un is removed from a meeting  
(Source BBC website, Dec 2013).



The picture above is an example of a loss-of-face situation in North Korea, showing the once powerful uncle of leader Kim Jong-un being removed from a meeting. Three days later he was reported executed after being charged with corruption. (Source: BBC website, 9 and 12 December 2013)

Another example that drew considerable media attention in 2011 comes from Japan in the aftermath of the tsunami. This photo shows how the managers of the Fukushima nuclear plant bowed in apology, pledging to do their best to get the plant's reactors under control and end radiation leaks.