CULTURAL AWARENESS: AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN THE SECURITY ASSISTANCE BUSINESS

By

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER CRAIG M. BRANDT, USN
Assistant Professor
Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management

In carrying out our security assistance programs, we must necessarily deal with representatives of the purchasing countries who usually do not share our language, our history, our customs or values. In short, the specific attributes that define a people's culture may present impediments to the implementation of our programs over and above the normal bureaucratic tangles which we encounter. The ability to surmount the obstacles imposed by cultural differences is a must if the U.S. representative is to succeed, whether it be overseas in a Security Assistance Organization (SAO) where the individual must cope with living and working in a foreign environment, or in a training installation in the U.S. where the Foreign Training Officer (FTO) must often deal with a wide variety of cultures in a single day.

The importance of cross-cultural awareness in an increasingly interdependent world was stressed in the 1979 Report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies:[1]

> Nothing less is at issue than the nation's security. At a time when the resurgent forces of nationalism and of ethnic and linguistic consciousness so directly affect global realities, the United States requires far more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of potential adversaries, and earn the trust and the sympathies of the uncommitted.

This report went on to bemoan the decreasing number of foreign language students and the decline in interest in foreign cultures and international studies as Americans have been tempted to retreat to "fortress America" in the aftermath of Vietnam. Even events such as the holding of hostages in Iran, an occurrence which clearly demonstrated many of our failings in the ability to negotiate in strange languages with representatives of dissimilar cultures, did not arouse an interest in cross-cultural communications, but instead created a feeling of xenophobia which is counterproductive to any improvement in this area. Clearly, those involved in our ever-expanding arms transfer business cannot succumb to such disinterest in those cultures with which we have such vital dealings.

One of the first steps in developing a cultural awareness is to consider those characteristics which provide the parameters for our own lives and those living elsewhere. Probably the most notable element of culture is the common language of a nation. Dress and

appearance, including clothes, hairstyles, and cosmetics, may indicate ethnic background, caste, or social class. Dietary restrictions are extremely relevant in many cultures. In some societies, clock watching and timeliness is taken for granted; in others, it is an absurd preoccupation. Relationships among family and friends, or between old and young, or seniors and subordinates may be highly formalized. The sense of personal space differs considerably, since in some cultures personal physical contact is important but in others must be scrupulously avoided.

While this list hardly constitutes a comprehensive inventory of cultural characteristics, it does give an idea of the many areas where the life that we know may differ considerably from that abroad. We must also realize that even on our own home ground the foreign students who come to the U.S. will find us greatly different from what they are used to in their home countries, and we should use our cultural awareness to minimize their discomfort.

Familiarity with a foreign language is perhaps the most significant key to understanding a foreign culture, because this knowledge can in many respects demystify the culture by removing a great barrier in communications and can temper the shock of the initial intercultural encounter. Although the value of fluency in a language is widely accepted, the Department of Defense does not always provide adequate language training, even for those personnel assigned overseas. With diminishing personnel resources and a lengthy period needed to attain reasonable fluency, it is often too easy to dismiss language training with such rationalizations as "everybody there speaks English," or "it's too difficult a language to learn." While it is true that many of the government officials with whom we deal on the job will speak English, the poultry dealer in the market, the mechanic in the garage, and the plumber trying to stop a leak in your ceiling probably do not; and furthermore, they are almost certain to be unfamiliar with our axiom that says they are supposed to. Difficulty in language usually is a two-way street; yet we arrogantly expect others to be able to speak English which is somehow "easier."

For those who did not receive language training, learning at least a basic vocabulary to cover ritual greetings and common social situations can pay great dividends. It will at least show you have made some effort to appreciate the foreign culture. For those in the SAOs, the immersion in the new culture, with the language always present, makes this a fairly easy task. The difficult part, of course, is to dig in and learn more than the basic "Hello, how are you?" so that you can be able to handle a wider variety of experiences. For the FTO, learning perhaps fourteen languages to accommodate a typical student load is obviously impossible. But what an impact enterprising FTOs could have if they could in fact greet all fourteen of their students in their native tongues!

While language may be a major tool that you will find extremely useful in breaking down cultural barriers, a more general need is to

develop some empathy with those of the culture; that is, to try and identify with the feelings, experiences, and values that are held by others. First, this means understanding some of the fundamental manifestations of the culture. For example, we must know the history of the country and its impact on the development of the people, some of the taboos that result from dietary restrictions or matters of personal hygiene, and some of the religious attitudes that pervade the daily life. This knowledge will permit the American abroad to fit into the new culture more comfortably, so he might commit fewer gaffes than otherwise; and for those who work with foreigners here, the realization that these variances exist can help us ease the anxieties of those who must confront the American way of life.

Once past these symbols of a culture, we must then be prepared to confront the value system which guides the foreigner's life. Concepts become values when they become extremely desirable or undesirable to a people.[2] Unfortunately, what might be desirable to one people can be totally the reverse to another, and this can cause clashes between different cultures. The value system is intermeshed with all of the more obvious trappings of a culture, and is the most difficult aspect of a culture for an outsider to comprehend. The manifestations of a value system are many. For example, the desire to plan time carefully and adjust behavior to a rigid and inflexible schedule is viewed as bizarre behavior in a society where time is not seen in hourly chunks but is allocated as necessary to the event in question. Western efficiency, with its emphasis on the rapid attainment of finite goals, can often be thwarted by those who value a more indirect approach to getting a job done; and the importance of personal relations can easily be overlooked by those who are accustomed to the interchangeability of the living cogs in the bureaucratic machinery.

These differences in values are often imperceptible to those insensitive to cultural differences; and this lack of discernment often leads to the conclusion that others are lazy, disorganized, devious, or just plain backward. On the other hand, because of our own value system, we are often criticized for being tense, overbearing, and aloof. While there is little likelihood of totally rejecting one's value system and substituting another, we can at least hope that our sensitivities to these distinctions will make our communications easier.

One final aspect of functioning outside of one's own culture cannot be overlooked. This might be termed daily survival tactics, i.e., the ability to get along where the social structure may be significantly different from one's own. Whether it is learning to use the microwave oven in the PX cafeteria or discovering where to get the tokens to use a public telephone, each country has its own surprises to offer in getting through the day. Whether to pay a fixed price or to haggle, how to find a certain address, where to find an adaptor so you can use your electric razor, how to cash a check, what size clothes you now wear -- all these questions crop up on a daily basis for the newcomer. To some, this is part of the charm of living in a

different environment. To others, the vexation of dealing with these difficulties may become an overwhelming burden that sours one's outlook on anything having to do with the new society. Many times, it is impossible to acquire this type of information before actually experiencing the problem. As in many other instances of surviving in a new world, patience and a sense of humor will often leave you in good stead.

The objective of cross-cultural orientation is the sensitization to those customs and values which differ from our own, so that in transactions with foreign citizens, either in their country or ours, we can come to appreciate their feelings and actions within the context of their culture, rather than in comparison with American beliefs or values. Ethnocentrism, the belief that the way we do things is the right way and everyone else should conform, is a shortcoming of human nature everywhere, whether you are from Texas or Nepal. But for the greatest probability of success -- overseas in Sweden or Liberia, or at a training site in Georgia or California -- we must be aware of the fallacy of this way of thinking if we are truly to relate to representatives of the security assistance customers.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Strength through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability. Report of the President's Commisson on Foreign Language and International Studies. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Office of Education. Washington DC: GPO, November, 1979, p. 1.

[2] K.S. Sitaram and Lawrence W. Haapanen. "The Role of Values in Intercultural Communications" in Handbook of Intercultural Communication, eds. M.E. Asante, Eileen Newmark, and Cecil A. Blake, Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1979, p. 149.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Commander Craig M. Brandt, USN, has been a member of the DISAM faculty since January, 1978, and serves as the Director of European Studies. He has served almost six years overseas, in Japan and Spain, and is a Navy Country Regional Specialist for Southern Europe -- Spain. LCDR Brandt holds a Master of Government Administration degree (University of Pennsylvania, 1975), and a Master of Arts Degree (Wright State University, 1981).