

Anita Negri Interview on Cross Cultural Management

oikos Maastricht alumna , former oikos International President

What are your thoughts on the process of adapting to a new multicultural environment (being in a team or in a country)?

Let me start off by saying that, in my view, multicultural awareness, understanding and adaptation can add incredible value to organisations but also to each of us individually, it can transform the way we think. I have been lucky in my life to have been able to live in places, and work with people from almost all over the world. Adapting to different environments is, thus, for me a relatively normal process, even though there are always challenges and failures that you learn from each time you are confronted with a different culture. Having good adaptability skills is actually rated as one of the most important elements to have in any role nowadays, and when I recruit for the company I surely look at this aspect too. So, adapting to new cultures should be a natural process, that comes with experience, we shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes. I think we can never stop learning about each other's cultures. Since it would be difficult to perfectly understand every single person's reactions, crossing those with his/her culture, circumstance, traditions, and the many many more aspects that make a human being; we might as well just go for it and try our best!

What were your personal attitudes that enabled you to conquer the culture shock?

Maybe one of the most important things to succeed through any experience in life is to be prepared, so plan your work and work your plan. Whenever you know there are going to be differences the least we can do is to prepare (psychologically too). Even though nothing can beat trying things on your own skin, reading and listening to those who have gone through it before you can help. Conquering a culture shock probably just comes with staying calm and not over-assuming or over-thinking, and maybe having a bit of intuition of when things are not going well. Sometimes we have high expectations of ourselves to adapt immediately or we believe we are going to be judged or that we will lose control. Maybe what we should all learn about each other's cultures is: not to make stereotypes the only story, not to be offended so easily, not to take 'normal' behaviors or habits for granted, not to see everything as a zero-sum game but to understand the spectrum instead. Most importantly we should understand that we are lucky to have certain technological means nowadays that enable interconnectedness and unification, so let's create opportunities out of that instead of issues. It is just a matter of keeping our minds open.

What has been the toughest cross cultural experience you have ever lived? How did you overcome it?

This is a tough question because I like culture in general so I never *just* blamed culture when I had a challenging experience. Maybe I can give an example of a country I went to once where there was a strong religious tradition and adapting to their ideals was tough, because you do not necessarily agree with everything, especially when there are inequalities between gender, age, etc. In that case I tried to understand their motifs and I tried to share my motifs too. What I also understood was that when one is so strongly involved in a belief one risks seeing that as the only truth. I would just like to mention that I came across many open-minded people in my life with strong opinions (having an opinion does not mean you do not listen to others and sometimes even change your mind) but I do also see many people around us who are rather closed and to me this is a huge pity for the world. Again, let's connect and create opportunities not block each other out.

Any (funny) anecdotes of critical incidents (cultural adaptation) that you would like to share with the oikos community?

Maybe in countries where the bathrooms are different from in Europe, I do find that uncomfortable sometimes with those. It's a question of habits 😊.

What were the key lessons learnt from having been the oikos president?

I wrote quite a few things about what oikos taught me, so a lot. Maybe one of the lessons learnt during my presidency was that we are actually all much more similar to each other than what we think, but we are just better at seeing the differences. The differences are surely positive: they make us unique and are valuable to be better problem-solvers and can help our societies in so many better ways; but we tend to focus on them in a negative manner. We should probably be better at realizing that there is not only one way of doing things and taking decisions, we shouldn't stop so easily at just the first best alternative. I believe there must be ways to maintain our efficiency without having to forego inclusive decision making, if anyone has ideas please do share. I would be very interested! And once a decision is taken it's important to keep moving, keep improving, modify if necessary but let's act.