

Eike Haas Interview on Cross-Cultural Management

Alumni from oikos Witten & former EB member

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

Let me address this on a rather analytical note: Whether you want to achieve goals being a multicultural team or get along with locals when backpacking a foreign country - I believe you need to create common realities, continuously build moments of understanding. When humans from different cultures interact, they may interpret mimics, gestures and verbal communication differently - even if they speak the same language. Because they learned different connotations and communication patterns in their respective cultural environments and associate different meanings to seemingly universal communication elements. Adaptation in this context means to reflect on the other's reactions and identify those differences - to assimilate the other's cultural environment. And this is required from all team members, from foreigners as well as locals.

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

Openness and curiosity, self-reflection and forgiveness, tolerance to frustration and persistence.

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

The toughest experience was backpacking through Kolkata in my early twenties - the first time I ever lived and traveled outside the 'western world'. I had been based in Delhi for work, explored Mumbai and a few other places. I thought I knew India and nothing could really shock me any more. But Kolkata's narrow streets, the noise, dirt, crowds, beggars, dead animals, smell was just overwhelming me. I could only overcome the shock by taking a break - I retreated to a fancy coffee place and wrote down my impressions. After a while, I felt recovered and went into the streets again.

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

May not be funny, but the anecdote of a critical adaption moment: I recently worked with a French senior manager, who was very kind and caring French senior manager who was very kind and caring, but also had his temper sometimes and gave direct negative feedback. It took me some days to adapt, especially since I got used to the indirect South African feedback by then. Halfway through the project, a transferring junior consultant from Japan joined and had to work directly with the French senior manager for several days. The Japanese colleague had never worked outside of Japan before. His task was to build a large excel model, consolidating business cases from different teams - a rather complex exercise. I was asked to supervise and support him and remember immediately bumping into the first meeting towards its end, in which the French senior manager spoke openly negative of the presented work in progress. I felt that he wasn't even very unhappy with the work itself, but rather had his temper. The poor Japanese colleague took it all with a gentle smile and many thanks, but obviously was very irritated. I took him aside after the meeting and tried to explain the French manager's mood - it was such a cliché example of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

How oikos helped you to have some keys in terms of cross-cultural management?

oikos is an international crowd. Any cross-chapter work, EB assignment, international meeting put me in a room with peers from other countries and continents. While we're all different, we all share the same passion for sustainability - which connects us, however significant our differences. That allowed me to connect with these peers and deepen my understanding of different cultures, how they approach sustainability - and also to identify and overcome some prejudices in my thinking.