

Address: Marcel Pruwer  
UNIVERSITEIT ANTWERPEN FLAMENCO- NUFFIC  
Good Practices Workshop  
Tuesday the 6th of November 2012

## THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN INTERNATIONAL AND INTER-CULTURAL COMPETENCES

**Distinguished Faculty,**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

In his book **“Wired for Culture”** Marc Pagel quotes the English 4<sup>th</sup> Baron Raglan **Major Fitzroy Richard Somerset** of the Queens Grenadier Guards who said **“ culture is everything we do and monkey’s don’t...”**

The **Dalai Lama** visited Japan a couple of years ago and, against a background of almost 20 years of Japanese economic slowdown and stagnation, he was asked what he would suggest as a solution. He courteously replied..... **“ learn English”**.

Having said that, whilst language is undoubtedly one of the key tools of communications and key to intercultural and international competence, it is not the only, or perhaps even the most important aspect...

But first, perhaps defining a little more clearly our terms of reference, will help shed light on our topic.

**Strengthening international and intercultural competences from the perspective of the business world...** does that imply a schizophrenic divide, a difference between the business and the social and political worlds? Do we put on another inter-cultural hat to be efficient in business, management, in entrepreneurship? A hat we don’t wear in other parts of our lives?

**And a second, low-key question, does Europe have a future if we can’t compete successfully, around the world?**

My background is the international diamond trade, in which Antwerp is still a world leader fighting to keep its position. The foundations of the Antwerp trade go back 500 years and start with intercultural dynamics, with traders, some of them Jews, arriving here to sell gems they had found in India.

It is an interesting fact that at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for a short period, Antwerp accounted for 40% of all world trade. This must have taken place on a reasonably open, inter-cultural platform, certainly for those days.

In life, in history, one sometimes sees that certain commodities, like diamonds, one of the contributing trades to Antwerp's Golden Age in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, have the power to draw people together and to encourage, to stimulate a cultural cross-over... because, to trade, to make money, you have to communicate... you have to understand each other, you have to come together.

In other places and times too, the attraction of making money, earning a living, trading, building something new, drew different cultures closer together, probably faster and more intensively than may otherwise be the case. **The diamond sector is therefore an example of where vastly different cultures do get along well because of a common commercial drive.** In order to achieve the common goal, in this case of doing business, it is important to have respect for each other's culture and tradition and to be open to other ways of thinking.

The diamond trade in Antwerp, which turned over €42 billion last year, is comprised of Flemish, Jewish, Indian, Lebanese, Israeli, Russian, Chinese, African, Armenian, Korean, Italian, Turkish, British and other "diamantaires", as we are called. The market, just 2 kilometres from here, is a true ethnic mix with daily interaction, buying, selling, partnerships, between all these groups, working successfully.

Because our Antwerp market offers an open healthy mix of cultures and people, we are attractive to other nationalities and traders from around the world who come here to buy and sell their rough diamonds, buy their polished, sell polished and look for business. They feel the welcome of a vibrant, open, culturally fertile sector. Because of this, 3 of the biggest mining houses in the world have offices in our sector, as does the Russian state diamond company.

In our sector, members of different ethnic groups enter into partnerships and formal business with each other. Medium and larger companies employ individuals from the other ethnic groups. Our representative organisations, including the sectors most important representative body, the AWDC, has Flemish, Jewish and Indian diamantaires on the Board. The current AWDC President is Stephane Fischler, from a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Jewish diamond family, and the previous President was Nishit Parikh, a leading Indian diamantaire.

One needs only to think about those successful trading cities through history Athens, Venice, Antwerp, London, New York and Shanghai, with their cultural melting pots, where through the common goal of pursuing commerce, they set the pace in finance, trade, culture and art.

So yes, economic circumstances are an important driver for inter-cultural cooperation and competences.

**I believe however that inter-cultural competence starts best from a personal attitude, an attitude that has its implications not only for the business world but also the broader social and political world.**

Our business starts with a rough diamond. A stone that can be polished into one of many different shapes, the classic round shape with 58 facets, the heart shape, the emerald, the pear-shape, the cushion-shape, each a different way of transforming the rough diamond into its final polished perfection. People are like that too. Every human being has potential that can shine if polished in the right way.

Even the polished diamond, once committed to its final shape will shine, reflect and refract light differently, depending on whether it is set in yellow gold, white gold, platinum, silver or set into a brooch, a ring, necklace, an ear-stud.

**People, like diamonds will shine, if they are given the right setting.**

If basic human decency requires an understanding, an appreciation and acceptance of one's fellow man, whatever their colour, nationality, or belief, then, one would argue this applies to the housewife, the student, the pensioner, the artist, the technician, the craftsman, the musician, and the business person.

Of-course circumstances and context will always play a role in inter-cultural dynamics.

Often, when you visit abroad as a tourist and sometimes even on business, you arrive in contrived, choreographed, visitor-friendly settings, you are not exposed to local culture...!..you visit tourist traps or are hosted by sophisticated company people who will make you feel comfortable in a relatively sterile, unchallenging setting.

You will have to make an effort to access and expose yourself to the true local culture and inevitably, it will be both a human and a business decision, as to how much a person should push to integrate, understand and communicate with another culture, a new environment.

### **PERSPECTIVE...**

There is no problem this morning taking as a perspective "the business world" in the context of strengthening international and inter-cultural competences, as business people are stakeholders in the universe too.

Certainly, we can take as given, that intercultural awareness facilitates communications and business and, helps you learn from other cultures.

The easy parts of the challenges of the intercultural world are simple to address, like language and communications, – so, when you look around at what goes wrong when companies do not pay sufficient attention to language and discourse, you will find examples like Pepsi, who, when they wished to advertise their drink with the tag line **“Pepsi - Come Alive”... found out that in Taiwan this translated into “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave”...**

But, this is mechanistic and technical! You would today, as a smart company employ, multi-lingual communications specialists and you will avoid these amusing but embarrassing, and potentially very expensive incidents.

So, let’s always bear in mind **George Bernard Shaw’s** insight into our topic

**“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place....”**

From the perspective of business, management and entrepreneurship, I believe one of the most important aspects of strengthening international and inter-cultural competences, is that you cannot work efficiently and effectively in an international setting unless you have made the effort to understand the people’s cultural mindset, biases and thinking.

Your teams can’t perform optimally – your customers won’t respond as you would like, your potential strategic partners won’t get it, your potential suppliers may not understand you...

You here, will all automatically have the reaction, and rightly so, that even in an all-Belgian or all-Dutch context, if your team is not aligned, in sync, and understanding and appreciating each other, you will not achieve optimum results! All very true. But you may also agree, that the scope for misunderstanding, errors, suspicion, is far greater when there are language and cultural differences.

**Let’s take this deeper, let’s drill down to the core.**

If you adapt a frame of mind in which you are curious, seeking understanding, tolerant, learning, your attitude is also a far healthier one for understanding all the critical challenges of management and business.

The chances are, if you are dogmatic, arrogant and opinionated about culture and nationalities, you are probably also going to be dogmatic and rigid about management, about being open to creative and not-invented-here solutions..

The obvious question is: **How?** How do we develop and apply an open mind?

**Substitute judgement and assumptions with questions.** Asking questions will open many doors and allow you to learn more than you thought there was to learn. It will allow the flow of information and ideas to be wider and more enriching.

As the Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote for us, **“for surely it is impossible for anyone to begin to learn that which he thinks he already knows....”**

**So, ask questions and respect the answers you get.** This will mould your mind into a thinking pattern which finds solutions and creates a mental environment that respects and incorporates different ideas in new ways. And, asking interested questions about a person’s culture and heritage is generally a good way to open channels.

And of-course, wide-ranging, varied and persistent reading, helps open up the world.

A more sensitive and expanded personal view and heightened cultural awareness, adds a dimension to your personality. You will think more, you will anticipate, you will question yourself, you will become richer in knowledge... **you will become a better human being in terms of personal growth, self-reflection, compassion, in terms of what in Yiddish is called, ‘Menschlichkeit’.**

**And, it must also be true, that exposure to another culture forces you to think about your own culture, yourself and your values!**

And as young people, with more elastic minds and less entrenched thought patterns, with time at college to think, talk and read, students have the best opportunity and tools to develop into a higher-performance human being.

Please note! for me, in our context today, higher-performance human being, has nothing to do with money...

## **THE DIGITAL WORLD**

The digital world accelerates and amplifies contacts with other people and cultures around the world. This can be a blessing if we avail ourselves of the ability to understand and appreciate, or it can multiply confusion and chaos.

Technology is shrinking the world. It creates opportunities to make more of global life “ local” which makes it more fun, more important and more rewarding, to learn and understand other cultures.

## **HUMILITY**

Based on my perspective in the years I have spent in the diamond trade and in other business, I deeply believe one thing. Far more important than the technical semantics of language, behavioural psychology, the ability to hold your drink, to navigate digital social media pathways, politeness and protocols, and corporate handbooks on intercultural codes and

conventions, is the **humility** and **interest** of a human being to keep an open mind and to take the trouble to appreciate, understand and empathize with one's fellow man.

For surely, a person who can do that, will have little trouble with the challenges of the commercial world or inter-cultural cooperation.

An interesting thought perhaps, from my business perspective. I remember a generation and more ago, if you were a manager in a medium or large company, you did what you could to stay on home base. It was generally considered that if you went abroad, you lost out in the office politics back home, and in the promotion stakes. Often, being sent abroad had a stigma. Not today. In recent years, looking at the world's best medium and largest sized businesses, many of the top positions are filled by people who rose through the ranks in postings abroad, picking up experience with different cultures, markets, languages, and challenges....making them better business people, better leaders and, I believe, better human beings.

## **PRESIDENT MANDELA**

I'd like to leave you with an example of the individual named the man of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Nelson Mandela. Some of you may have seen the film **Invictus**....at a point in the film, a group of activist black ANC firebrands decide to abandon everything to do with the South African rugby team, the Springboks. The fact that their green and gold emblem was a symbol of Afrikaner culture was too much for the ANC activists and they wanted to use their new power to throw it out. They voted unanimously against keeping the Springboks as the national rugby team. The Springboks in South Africa represents a huge source of pride and identity for many millions of whites.

President Mandela got a call that this vote had taken place. He abandoned a scheduled government meeting with a Japanese trade delegation to rush over to the location where the meeting was still in place.....he walks in... and basically what he says to them is... **I spent 27 years on Robben Island as a prisoner, my wardens were all Afrikaners.... I spoke with them, I read their books, I read their poetry..** I thought I had to understand my enemy, to bring him close in order to prevail against him. I tell you if you take away their team that is so dear to their hearts, you will lose them.... You will prove to them that in everything they feared about us, they were right. **He knew their culture, he could respect it, even after 27 years in prison. Because he had taken the trouble to understand it, he saved South Africa from the prevailing prognosis of that time, bloodshed and chaos.**

The future survival and success of Europe in any kind of way we would be happy with, will critically depend on our ability to operate and compete effectively around the world, across cultures.

**I do apologise if I have left you with questions, it is undoubtedly because I do not have the answers.**

**Thank you for listening and I wish you great good luck with your careers, and even more important, with the development of your minds and of your lives.**

Marcel Pruwer

Antwerp, 6, November, 2012