Culture Specific or Culture General: That is the Question!

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The senior manager was about to accept an assignment in India, and eagerly approached her human resources department for information about the specific do's and don'ts of her future life overseas. They had heard this request before, for dozens of countries and from hundreds of transferees. HR was well prepared with briefing books, websites, and a pre-departure program that would assure the manager and her family a relatively smooth transition.

But was she really well prepared? Upon her arrival, ably managed with organizational support, she found herself on a highly diverse team, with colleagues from over ten countries. Her daily emails bombarded her with perspectives from multiple Asian countries, many more than she had experienced in her most recent assignment. With constant video conferences and virtual team members, she found herself in a culturally complicated context that her briefing book on India could not begin to address.

She is not alone. Rare is the professional arena where we face colleagues from only one or two cultures. Instead, each of us operates with a wealth of cultural diversity that is rich, complex, and challenging. This reality suggests that learning a single specific culture serves us well, and learning about cultural difference in general serves us even better.

Our natural--and appropriate--instinct is to seek specific information when we are going to a specific place. Who among us, assigned to Bangalore, would not read everything we could find about India? This is certainly necessary, but unfortunately not sufficient. Without understanding culture in general, we may find ourselves with an insufficiently stocked toolkit, unable to handle many of the tasks at hand.

In the field of intercultural training, this contrast is described by the terms "culture general" and "culture specific." Culture general simply refers to frameworks that provide a perspective for comparing and contrasting cultures. Since these frameworks are based on abstract categories from anthropology, intercultural communication, linguistics, and organizational psychology, they do not refer to any particular cultures, but rather provide general categories that facilitate our exploration of values, beliefs, and behaviors in any culture.

For instance, one such framework might examine value differences related to status and power, exploring how culture influences individuals' attitudes toward power distance, hierarchy, authority, formality, class, in-group/out-group distinctions, etc. This framework could easily be applied to examining the potential differences among the ten colleagues of the senior manager noted above. It could be equally useful to a domestic manager at a local worksite, perhaps never far from his home, to resolve motivational issues with his diverse team.