

Dear SIETAR India members and supporters,

It is on a note of gratitude and optimism that we would like to begin this newsletter. Thank you for your active participation at the first of our webinar series for 2020 “Your Virtual Toolkit” facilitated by Jill Sheldekar. It is no exaggeration to say that we all learned and connected! Given the social distancing measures in place in most parts of the world today, virtual facilitation and communication skills have now become a necessity. Our work as interculturalists has become even more critical with borders being closed down due to the pandemic and fearful knee-jerk responses coming to the fore.

We are excited to announce that the second of our webinars will be facilitated by Sailaja Manecha on April 28th on the topic of women’s journeys in leadership. More details will follow. Do register for the free webinar when we send out the invitation by March end.

In the SIETAR world, we are particularly excited to welcome a new regional SIETAR, SIETAR Southeast Asia.

We take a moment to honour Geert Hofstede, who passed away in February 2020. No one in the intercultural field is a stranger to his work and legacy.

For your reading pleasure, we have curated a few articles reflecting the voices of our members.

For the SIETAR India Board,  
Sunita Nichani,  
President



# OUR WEBINARS

## STEP IN TO STEP UP

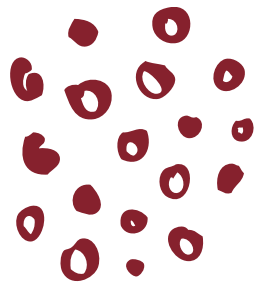
***Presenter:*** Sailaja Manacha,

*Author/Psychotherapist/Transformational Coach*

***Date:*** April 28th 2020

***Timings:*** 20:30 IST/17:00 CET/ 11:00EST

Is there a way to know what has shaped us physically, psychologically and emotionally and how this either limits us or supports our professional lives? I will share some limiting patterns that show up especially for women leaders and share some ideas to change our narratives and STEP UP. I present this from the lens of a woman and yet it is relevant to any person's leadership journey.



## UNITY AND DIVERSITY - THE INDIAN KALEIDOSCOPE

***Presenter:*** Nirmala Menon,

*HR Professional: listed among the top 50 Diversity professionals in the Global Diversity List Founder Interweave Consulting*

***Date:*** 25th August 2020

***Timings:*** 20:30 IST/17:00 CET/ 11:00EST

This webinar gives an overview of diversity and inclusion from an Indian context. The presenter will showcase diversity in India by: Tracing the history and background of D&I in India Understanding modern India Current challenges and focus area for India Inc.

# Lights out!

by Ishita Ray

Tata Consultancy Services



Day 1 of a 5-day client visit: 10 Clients from the USA and Germany are in India to meet with the account leads in a large MNC. The day begins with a cross-culture sensitisation session for the clients. The Indian account leads are seated along with the clients around one big oval table in the room. The cross-culture expert, also an Indian, begins the proceedings.

A few minutes into the session the lights in the room go out. A few gasps from some client members, but the trainer goes on. Within a few seconds, the lights come back on. The trainer has not paused or stopped. Some of the client members look at each other, look a little unsettled, but gather themselves and resume listening.

In another ten minutes, lights go out again. The clients are again unsettled, the trainer still unperturbed. Again in a few seconds, the lights are back. The third time this happens, the clients are audibly and visibly disturbed. They don't know what's going on. This time, the trainer pauses, smiles and says, *"It's the generator in the building. The power supply trips for a few seconds before it turns back on."* She then continues with the session.

The clients, not very convinced, acknowledge that they at least have an explanation now. Some shrug their shoulders, some look at the others in disbelief. By and large, they continue participating in the ongoing discussion. The lights out drill recurs another couple of times till it is Q&A time. In a flash comes the first question from one of the German clients, *"How come you are not distracted by the lights going out every time?"* Almost instantly comes the reply from one of the Indian account leads, *"It's normal!"*

A perfect moment to bring out a difference in perception of "normal" through an everyday phenomenon. A look at Hofstede's cultural dimensions tells us that India scores a 40 in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension whereas Germany stands at 65. A glance into Edward Hall's cultural concepts will tell us that Germans are more monochronic and the Indians polychronic. Indians, therefore, are likely to be less perturbed by ambiguity and are more at ease with 'distractions' than Germans.

Cultures influence not just working styles – they translate into ways of looking at everyday things. The next time we brush something aside as 'normal' or stare in disbelief at another's actions, let us look outwards and inwards to see the differences, but also the similarities.



# What corporates ought to expect from an intercultural training session

*by Jeyanthi Srinivasan*

*Head –Bosch Institute of Cultures and Languages*

Companies organize intercultural training when their employees are getting ready for an on-site assignment or when beginning a new business collaboration with a new country. In such a scenario, both the organizers and participants expect a list of Do's and Don'ts as general rules for the country they are visiting, as well as some basic facts about the new culture that they are going to encounter, so that they feel secure and well prepared.

Yet, experienced and qualified learning professionals know that intercultural competence is much more than just some basic factual information on the country. Intercultural competence is a transfer competence, i.e the ability to transfer a combination of skills and apply it to the new cultural context and act accordingly. According to Prof Bolten from University of Jena, intercultural competence is a combination of knowledge of the new culture along with right social skills and problem-solving and decision-making skills. Another important dimension is the personality traits of individuals such as the ability to change perspectives, take initiatives and to have a distance to one's own role. The ability to reflect on the situation critically and to tolerate ambiguity also adds to the intercultural competence of the person.

Considering this rather complex interplay of forces, an intercultural trainer who is sincere in his/her efforts, should try to impart a combination of these skills and create awareness about these aspects, which will help the participants to reflect and position themselves.

One more pitfall to sidestep is to avoid creating stereotypes of the target culture. While stereotypes give a rough orientation and structure for the participants to have a picture of the new culture such as “Germans are very punctual” or “Indians are very attached to their family” and put family above work, there is big risk that it brings; it can create bias and remove the openness of participants towards the new culture. This approach also has the risk of defining the other culture as a closed container with specific properties, which further creates polarization like ‘We’ vs ‘Them.’

Last but not the least, the objective of these trainings is to create an openness and tolerance and bring their participants to see the intercultural context more as an opportunity for new ideas rather than as challenges and barriers that need to be overcome.

This attitude change will take the participants a long way on the journey of intercultural competence!



# Talking to Strangers - Through an Interculturalist Lens

by **Sunita Nichani**

*Intercultural Consultant and President of SIETAR India*

As interculturalists, our work often consists of making the strange seem familiar and of looking at the familiar with the perspective of a stranger. It is undoubtedly due to this, that I was drawn to Malcolm Gladwell's book titled *"Talking with Strangers."* The fundamental premise of the book is that living in a border-less world as we do, one has no choice but to talk with strangers and yet we are most ill-equipped to have these conversations. While the author does not necessarily define a stranger as a cultural other, his analysis of the fallacies to which we fall prey while talking to strangers has a resonance for interculturalists.

Here are some of the main ideas of his book which I find extremely pertinent for our field even though they may not be completely new for some of us.

## Default to truth

Citing famous historic instances and legal trials, Gladwell uncovers an interesting pattern. When talking with strangers, we (experienced judges included!) tend to assume that they are speaking the truth. To quote Gladwell, *"Those occasions when our trusting nature gets violated are tragic. But the alternative- to abandon trust as a defense against predation and deception is worse".*

**My takeaway:** It reassures me to know that when I encourage my coachees to ascribe positive intent to their colleagues from another culture, it is in fact what we would naturally do, given the fact that our default position is to consider that the stranger is speaking the truth or at least his/her truth as an interculturalist might say.

## The illusion of asymmetric insight

A study conducted by psychologist Emily Pronin, reveals that while dealing with strangers we fall prey to *"a conviction that we know the other better than they know us and that we have insights about them that they lack (but not vice-versa) which leads us to talk when we would do well to listen".*

**My takeaway:** Apart from the importance of active listening, the necessity for an interculturalist to resist oversimplification and help decode the cultural other in all their complexity and ambiguity.

## Transparency

In a world where sitcoms have avid following all over the planet, it is tempting to imagine that facial expressions and emotions can be read universally. A phenomenon that Gladwell calls the *Friends* fallacy owing to the global success of this sitcom.

**My takeaway:** Decoding the emotions of cultural others is a highly complex task with important stakes. An incident that comes to mind is one related to me by one of my coachees, a French director sent to Sri Lanka for a two-year assignment. His learning moment happened when his Gallic burst of anger at a shoddy job was met by a smile from his Sinhalese secretary. This only aggravated his anger as he interpreted her smile as being revelatory of a *"don't care a damn attitude"* with regard to her work. Later, he learned that it was her cultural way of apologising and keeping face in what was an extremely uncomfortable situation for her.

I would like to conclude with my favourite phrase from this book- *"The search to understand a stranger has real limits.....The right way to talk with strangers is with caution and humility".*

# Intercultural Competence: Guide to 21st Century Success?

by By Heather Robinson

Founder and Principal Consultant of Success Across Borders



Studying success seems a good way to learn to be successful. Many of us know that Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, the Nordic countries, since the 1960's consistently rate the highest on standard of living, social support, business climate and happiness indices. Yet, it has not always been that way. A little-known history tells us how starting in 1860, the feudal monarchies of the Nordic countries transformed themselves from desperation, poverty and misery to arguably a beacon of societal well-being in less than hundred years.

How did this happen? The answer might surprise you. They established retreat centers for inner growth! Hundreds of them. Remember, this is the 1860's. In the retreat centers, with the support of the state, young adults could spend up to six months to find their own inner self. Why? So they could be indoctrinated by the state? No - quite the contrary! The goal was for the average citizen to become more self-aware and better equipped to deal with the sea change the Industrial Revolution was bringing in Europe. To foster in them a strong sense of self so they could resist the call of fundamentalist religion and authoritarian leaders. To cultivate their ability to recognize and manage their emotions in an increasingly complex world and become active co-creators of their own lives and relationships. The intention was not simply to educate the elite, but to cultivate a society where every individual was self-aware, knowledgeable, empathetic and socially responsible. The success indicators tell us that it worked remarkably well.

We are still on the logarithmic trajectory of increasing complexity that began with the Industrial Revolution and has continued with the Technical Revolution, the Digital Revolution and beyond. Could it be that our success going forward in this increasingly complex and interconnected world, just as with the Nordic nations in the 1860s, will be determined, as it was then, not entirely by how well we learn about our outer world, but also how we learn about our inner world?

What does this have to do with intercultural competence? Everything! If we think about intercultural competence of consisting of three core skills:



Understanding ourselves as cultural beings.



Understanding others motivations and empathizing with them.



Co-creating a solution that serves all involved.

These core skills closely mirror elements of the Nordic secret – self-awareness, empathy and co-creativity. Think about this the next time you conduct an intercultural training: you may just be passing on the 21st century secret to success!

For more on the Nordic secret to success, read, “The Nordic Secret – A European Story of Beauty and Freedom” by Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Bjorkmann. For more on the three core intercultural competence skills go to:

<http://www.culturaldetective.com/why/cultural-detective.html>



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## SOCIETY FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION, TRAINING & RESEARCH

The Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR) - India is a non-profit association of educators, researchers and trainers from a wide range of practical and academic disciplines who share a common concern for intercultural relations. SIETAR-India provides an opportunity to learn from and share with colleagues in the intercultural arena and advance the body of knowledge and practice in the field.

Established in 1974, SIETAR has over 3500 members world-wide with affiliates in many countries. SIETAR holds Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) status with the United Nations and the Council of Europe. SIETAR - India is part of the global network of SIETAR organizations.

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