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Culture Is A Many-Splintered Thing

In our globalized world, an increasing number of business deals and resulting lawsuits involve people from diverse cultures. When these international disputes go to mediation, the best results are achieved by those with cross-cultural negotiation skills.

Look Beyond National Culture

One mistake is to look only at national culture in international negotiations. For example, it's not enough to know that you are negotiating with a person from China. You need to understand exactly which Chinese person you are talking to. Is this person from Beijing or Shanghai? Did this person come from the countryside and moved to the city, or was he or she born and raised in the city?

The point is, in addition to national culture, there is also educational culture, race culture, gender culture, financial culture and religious culture. All of these factors impact the way people behave and they are all "cross cultural." These cultural factors help us understand how the other person thinks and communicates. Thus, we can negotiate with that person and be more persuasive. Don't underestimate the role of culture by only looking at national culture. We need to try to understand all the other factors.

Proximity Assumptions

On the opposite scale, if the person across the table comes from a similar background, people can also fall into the trap of making incorrect assumptions. Why? Because with that person, we might feel we are so alike that we assume that we should know and understand each other. Social scientists call this the "liking" principle of persuasion. However, the risk is that one may over-estimate that proximity to his or her detriment.

Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede conducted an empirical study of cultural differences in 56 countries. You may find useful pre-negotiation cultural information on his website, www.geert-hofstede.com, by searching for the particular country of interest.

For best results, we should regard every negotiation as a "cross-cultural" exercise.