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*Interview with Dr. Boyd Johnson, anthropologist, chair of the DOL program at Indiana Wesleyan University*

*Postgraduate psychology students from Ljubljana University have organized a conference about psychological support to those who work abroad, to companies who send their employees abroad and about the ups and downs of working in a foreign country, leaving home and coming back. One of the main themes of the conference was cultural intelligence, which is a more and more cherished and used construct in the business world. One of the guests at the conference was Dr. Boyd Johnson, professor at the Indiana Wesleyan University, more specifically at the doctoral program called Organizational Leadership. One of his main research themes is also cultural intelligence. He has lived abroad for several years (in*

*Thailand and Australia) and has traveled the world extensively. He was an active member of World Vision, a humanitarian organization. In his doctoral dissertation he addressed the reasons for the failure of international aid programs in Tanzania. Dr. Johnson and I met online for an interview, which was a really interesting talk about cultures, different perspectives and working with a variety of different people.*

*1. In your opinion, what is the most important competence a leader of a multicultural team should have?*

There are a lot of skill sets and competences that someone should have but I think that the most important is cultural intelligence, which is the ability to work with other cultures and more importantly the knowledge and the motivation. Many people have knowledge but they are not really motivated to get to know folks from other cultures and understand them. Motivation and knowledge are very important and then, of course, behavior. These are the areas that are covered by cultural intelligence – to be able to understand others, to want to understand their perspective, and to be able to work with them in a way that is mutually beneficial.

*1. How can employers and managers use the construct of cultural intelligence for more efficient work abroad?*

The good thing to know about cultural intelligence and about cross-cultural competencies is that it can be a learned skill. It is not something that some have and some don't. There are certain characteristics that some people have and others don't, but this is one that can be learned and if a person is motivated they can get better and better at it. That is what makes it a very useful skill. Therefore, if that is true, and I believe it is, it means that companies need to think about ways to access information on how to train their employees to become more culturally sensitive and to be able to work with those of other cultures who are maybe very different from them. Cultural intelligence can be developed through all sorts of training; through information of course – that is the knowledge part. There are also lots of

different ways to do role playing, lots of different experiences that can be given to those who want to learn these skills and a lot of individual (one on one) conferencing. A test can be given to measure this so you can see your weak areas and your strong areas and then be able to work on the weak areas to develop them. The whole idea of coaching is useful as well. I think cultural intelligence training is not a one-time thing that you get and you just have it forever – it is something that is very subtle and you need to develop it over time. You never reach a perfect state of cross-cultural ability. The good news is that it can be better and better the more you do it.

1. *What is the practice of using cultural intelligence in companies in the USA?*

Many companies are becoming aware of the tools that are available. When I began working cross-culturally many years ago (I don't want to say how many), there was very little training. I was sent overseas and they basically said here is your ticket, good luck (laughs). There was no cultural training, but fortunately I have been trained as an anthropologist – I studied anthropology and done two degrees in it. At least I had that background but an average person working overseas in international development had no way of being able to be trained aside from reading books and articles and whatnot. In the last fifteen years in particular there has been an explosion of information and training tools of all kinds - videos and self-assessment tools, group activities, seminars, and workshops that people can go to. I myself would do something like that in Thailand where there was an organization that worked with any foreigner coming into the country to give them the so called “Survival in Thailand” lessons (laughs) and that was to give you an overview of the culture and the history, an introduction to the values, beliefs and norms in that culture and to help you to navigate it. Was it enough? No. But at least it was a start. The awareness of this issue has grown so much and that is just great. It is not just for those coming into the country but for those going out to other countries as well.

The training is available, but it is just up to the organization to decide if they want to take advantage of it.

1. *In short, can you describe how the concept is used in leadership development?*

Most companies realize that the further up somebody goes in the organization, the more contact they will probably have with those from other cultures. They would either have to go to other cultures or they would deal with people within the country the company is in to have to understand people with different backgrounds and different attitudes, norms and beliefs. As part of leadership development, it used to be that they just trained people in management skills, for example how to manage human resources or conflict or how to set goals, strategic planning, how to read a financial report etc. And that is still all important of course, but now more companies, at least in the United States, are including cultural training as a part of the package of training for leaders in the company. In fact, there are several companies that I know of that in order to be promoted to the highest ranks you have to have had an international experience. By that I don't just mean one week in a country, living in a hotel, but an actual assignment where you have lived in a country and hopefully even learned the language and survived in that culture for longer than just a few weeks.

1. *In the course of your career, did you notice any changes in the cultural intelligence of leaders and other employees?*

Well, it varies. The important point is whether the organization is really motivated to do this. I have seen the whole range. I have seen organizations that have no interest in this whatsoever and they feel that everybody should be like them. That is called ethnocentrism and it means that you use your own culture as a standard by which you judge other cultures. They can't believe that everybody doesn't want to be like them. I don't think that's a good thing. At the other end of the spectrum there are organizations and leaders in those organizations that understand that, like

it or not, we are living in a global environment, the world is becoming more and more interconnected. So we are becoming more and more in touch with each other in every area. There is not a profession that is not touched by globalization. The leaders need to be not only open to it they have to be ahead of it. They have to be able to train their people and also in the selection of individuals to work for organizations. One thing I have noticed is that that is becoming an important part of the interview process. Companies want to know what someone's experience is and the receptivity to other cultures because one of the worst things that can happen is to hire somebody who is culturally insensitive or worse, a cultural bully – who feels they need to push their own culture on everybody else and cannot work in a cross cultural situation. Believe me I have seen that. The danger of having a cultural incompetent in your organization is just too great now. If you are in business, you can lose business so fast. Contracts can be taken back or not signed because of the insensitivity of individuals. So, it is very important to have this concept as part of the hiring process as well.

1. *Which are the most important points a researcher should take into account when conducting a cross-cultural study?*

I believe that anybody who studies cross-cultural issues needs to first and foremost be aware of their own cultural biases and their own cross-cultural strengths and weaknesses. If you are not aware of your own personal biases or strengths, then you have blind spots. And then you would take your blind spots and take them into the research. We can't help but do that, we are human and everything that we do as humans is filtered through ourselves. That is why my belief is that the best research that is done in this area is done by teams, global teams. It is so important to bring a variety of perspectives into research of all kinds but particularly cross-cultural research because each of us sees the world through a different lens, a different filter – it is called our world view. If you have a team that works together, certain individuals will see some things that the other members of the team don't see and

vice versa. I think that includes not only mixed teams culturally but mixed teams in terms of backgrounds as well. For example, I think that teams should be a mixture of men and women. I think that you should have a mixture of backgrounds, different educational experiences, different training that you had, different experiences in other countries, because if you bring that all together you can help each other hopefully overcome the problems with blind spots. You will never have a perfect team but at least you can do better than one person who is limited by their own restrictions.

1. *What are in your opinion the main problems and positive aspects of globalization that enable us to work anywhere and do anything?*

On the negative side I think the fact that we are more and more in touch with other cultures is causing people to become a bit more xenophobic. I'm not a psychologist but I think that increases peoples' sense that they are being threatened, that their culture is being invaded by other cultures. The stress level goes up because there are so many differences and they don't feel comfortable. Those who have only related with folks from their own culture in the past are now forced to deal with people from other cultures. For many people that is very threatening. Unfortunately we have seen a rise of a backlash against globalization. I'm sure that you have seen it in Europe, as well as here in North America where there is large groups of people who don't want globalization and are working against it. They are trying to either restrict the contact that they have or worse, have tried to take legal action against others. I think what we want to do is realize that and have some compassion for those who are threatened by this. I personally find international relations to be extremely exciting and positive, but I know I'm not typical in this regard. So, the downside is that it can increase tension and xenophobia. On the positive side there is no question that it enriches people's lives. As you get to know people from other cultures, you certainly get to learn more about yourself and what you take for granted, you become a better person because your mind is open to other

possibilities, other ways of living, other ways of thinking and other ways of acting. That opens up possibilities for creative partnerships that I think are going to be the future. I can't see us surviving as a species if we don't develop intercultural cooperation and respect.

1. *You have worked and lived in many different countries. In all of your experiences, did you encounter any interesting differences between cultures and what surprised you the most?*

Oh, where to begin... I will talk about the culture that I spent the most time in outside of Canada and USA. That would have to be Thailand. What was probably the hardest for me to understand is how you could live in a culture where they don't have a word for "no". Literally, there is no word for "no". There are many ways to express it, though. I found navigating that culture very difficult because it's so different from the directness of us, North Americans. I think that was very difficult and surprising because I thought that everybody would want to express how they thought to others. I just assumed that was how people wanted to live. But the Thais have a very subtle way of communicating with each other, very round about, indirect way that I could never get. It was like I was always ten steps behind and just couldn't catch up. Don't get me wrong, the Thais are wonderful people but it was very difficult to come from a much more direct culture to a very indirect and subtle culture. The other surprise I had that was probably very great was when we moved to Australia, which of course is an English speaking country with a British background. We just assumed because they were English speaking, that everybody was going to be like us. We couldn't have been more wrong. The Australians are completely different from North Americans. They saw the world differently, had different attitudes toward many things. It was a greater culture shock, because our guard was down. The irony of that is that I should have known, because I spent a fair amount of time in Great Britain and I knew that the British were also very different from Americans. I quickly picked that up, yet I assumed that the

Australians are going to be the same. In Australia I lived in Sydney and I worked with a completely Australian team except for me. They all understood each other very well. They could make jokes and I didn't really understand their humor and they didn't understand mine. That is a very important part of culture for me, because I like humor. The humor in Australia was completely different. So, working in that environment as the only one from my own culture was at times very lonely but as I began to understand them over time (we were there for a couple of years), it really became easier and easier to adapt. But here's the key – I was the one who had to adapt. I couldn't expect the whole office to become like me. It was not just the number of Americans and Australians it was the fact that I was a guest in their country. I had to always remember that. Just like when you go to somebody's house you don't say: "I don't like the way you decorated the house, you have to change that." (laughs) If you start criticizing how people live they don't take that very well. I was very careful trying to be a good guest when I was living in a foreign country.

1. *You have also worked for a humanitarian organization World Vision. In today's humanitarian crisis in Europe, which values are the most important and which do you think we are lacking?*

I will be frank with you, I don't really feel confident to address the European situation. As an outsider I think it would be a bit arrogant of me to advise Europeans on what is going on. If you don't mind, I think I will back off from the specifics of the context. I know it is very sensitive, that there are a lot of problems. We read about it over here. I would rather speak more generally if I may. I have worked in international development in many countries. In fact, my doctoral dissertation was on the reason for the failure of most international aid projects. Everywhere I went I saw the failure of development projects that were extremely well meant. They were good intentions on the part of governments or private volunteer organizations, NGO's and yet there was a universal failure of programs

after the money stopped. So the projects would all fail and I couldn't understand why that was and why what people meant as a good thing turned into such a bad thing. Recently there has been a lot written about this. I am glad to see some others are interested. But when I was doing international development there was nobody who talked about this. That was, what I called, the dirty secret of international development. So I did my doctoral dissertation on it in East Africa, in Tanzania, which has received the most foreign aid of any country in Africa and is still one of the poorest in the world. The irony of that is almost staggering. What I found was not so much a difference in intentions but it was a difference in the values and the ideology that was guiding those different cultures. Part of an ideology or a world view is the idea of a better future. The villagers in Tanzania had a very different idea of what they wanted as the better future than the aid agencies which came in with their view. They went right by each other, they didn't connect. Whose fault was that? In the case of international development it would have to be the organization that is bringing in the money. The main point is that the communities and the agencies were going in different directions.

*To conclude, it is extremely important to be aware of other cultures and be motivated to accept different people in order to work well with others and inspire cooperation. My personal experience of cooperating with Dr. Boyd Johnson and sociologist Dr. Svitlana Buko in a pilot study of cultural intelligence of Slovenian students was very positive. Although brief, our talks were interesting and informative. But what made the greatest impression on me is the interest that both Dr. Johnson and Dr. Buko showed for our work, culture and our understandings of the issues in cultural competencies. I would definitely describe our cooperation as an example of great cross-cultural communication.*