Why are we often afraid to recognize and talk about cultural differences?

Introduction: Paul and Rosalyn are colleagues at a large global company.

Needed: Evolution

Paul: It's an irony in our increasingly global world….

Rosalyn: What are you talking about Paul?

Paul: Well, it just seems that as we interact with people from other cultures, we don't really talk together about each other's culture. In fact, it seems to me like we actually avoid it. Oh sure, we can chat at lunchtime about our culture's food and holidays and some of the cardinal sins you commit if you don't know how to use chopsticks the right way. But we tend to steer clear of getting into depth.

Rosalyn: But what about Amir, for example? He is from India and has become a friend of yours, no?

Paul: Well sure, but I don't really know much about his culture – about the significant differences between Indian culture and American culture. I think that you need to clearly know those differences before you can develop a deep friendship. I mean, our culture is what made us who we are today. You know, I have heard that many of the marriages in India today are still arranged. Amir is my friend but I feel reluctant to ask him about that, even though I am very curious. I mean, where does this hesitation and fear come from? He is my friend, right? It's weird if you really think about it. This fear makes us appear as primitives in a world of cultural difference. What I mean is that primitive ways of behaving can be characterized by being fearful of things you don't understand.

Rosalyn: Well, taking into account that point of view, maybe 100 years from now, people around the world may look back at our era of globalization and say, "they didn't openly talk about cultural differences….they seemed to even be afraid to recognize and discuss cultural differences….that is curious because culture really makes us who we are….why wouldn't people want to get to know each other better and form deeper relationships by getting to understand the others' cultural influences?"

Paul: Yea, that's an interesting vision…

Rosalyn: You know, I went to a diversity workshop last month and the trainer said that a good practice is to leverage the diversity in our teams and work groups. I think she meant that we understand and accept the differences and leverage the similarities.

Paul: That's another thing – these buzz words that people use about global relationships! What does "leverage diversity" mean Rosalynn!? Can you give me one example of how you have been involved with a multicultural group or individual counterpart and you have leveraged diversity?

Rosalyn: Yes, in meetings we always try to include people from different countries, races and ethnic groups as well as both men and women – so that they all have a seat at the table.

Paul: You're going corporate-speak on me here Rosalynn – a seat at the table….In most of the meetings I attend it seems to me like the people in the minorities and the majorities all pretty much act alike. So, what does it matter that they are present in terms of diversity? It feels like a kind of magical way of thinking to me; "if we have people with different skin color, ethnic background, religion, and ways of thinking in our meetings and as part of our projects, we will be a diverse organization and this qualifies us to say that we value differences." It seems like they think true diversity is a symbiotic process.

Rosalyn: Hey, take it easy. When everyone has a place at the table, we can take advantage of the synergy that occurs. People from different cultures have different ideas and ways of seeing the world. That is valuable to the whole group.

Paul: OK, Roz, like a broken record....please give me some examples of other-culture people bringing out an idea from their culture that changed something about the way your group was handling something.

Rosalyn: Hmm

Paul: I have been really getting into some interesting conversations with people from other cultures lately focusing on how we change or don't change our cultural behavior. After a conversation with Michael, our colleague who has recently arrived from China, I am thinking that this business of different ideas and perspectives is too soft and doesn't really end up anywhere in an actionable way. People talk about the need for awareness. But what about the need for concrete action to better work with our counterparts? He has been surprised at how easy it looks to be for Americans to take risks. He is amazed that Americans don't check everything with their bosses and can speak directly to them. I don't think these new behaviors look like wonderful new ideas to him, but rather something he is struggling with and trying to figure out what to do. I don't think he wants anything to do with taking risks, much less leveraging them, whatever that means. He said that in China fear of punishment for failure was maybe the largest force behind his actions as an employee. His boss was basically responsible for everything and Michael's main concern was to please and serve his boss. He did everything he could to avoid risks and barriers that might lead to failure. So now, he said that if he would try to take risks like his American colleagues do, it would be like jumping off a cliff. But if he can't manage to do that he recognizes that he may not be successful with his team. When I asked him if he had talked to his team members or manager about this, he looked a little shocked and just shook his head no. See, here is a situation in which he and his team need a way to communicate about this – it is a cultural difference after all, not a major character flaw.

Needed: Going Beyond Style-Switching

Rosalyn: Well, from what I learned in my diversity class, I discovered that the way people write emails is impacted by their culture and that people from many countries tend to put more time and energy into interpersonal relationships in the workplace, which helps them to work better at the tasks with people. So, I have been including more greeting language and small talk questions in emails with our group in Mexico. It seems like I have been getting better and quicker responses to my emails now. So, that's an action.

Paul: Right - that kind of behavior change I have heard referred to as style-switching. I think it can be quite helpful in establishing relationships and accomplishing our tasks together with intercultural counterparts. But what I am getting at is that you went to a class for this. It is happening a lot now that people from our culture go to a class or get some coaching on how to adapt their behavior to the other culture. Then the people in the other culture also go to a class where they talk about our culture and they strategize ways to adapt to our culture. This has helped people a lot since this kind of intercultural learning started. Style-switching now is complicated by global teams. You know on that big project I worked on last year, we had team members from several countries, a few African-Americans, two Jews from Brooklyn and a good mix of men and women.

Needed: Universal Communication Process and Skill Set

I think what we need is skills and a good process for talking **with** the other cultures rather than **about** them. In that way we could collaborate on how to adapt our behaviors to each other. For example, in the beginning of the project with Mexico, you could have all communicated together about how to write emails more productively, each sharing your cultural behaviors and discussing which way you could do emails and other communication to accomplish the project goals. If we had this kind of process and these skills it would build our capacity for independently discussing cultural differences and reconciling those differences to accomplish our goals. Plus, I just think our relationships would be more interesting and satisfying because of increased depth and trust.

Rosalyn: Yea, I kind of see what you mean. But I think people can get defensive and think you are trying to change their culture.

Paul: You're exactly right. I think the fear comes in because we don't know how to talk about cultural differences. I think that is one reason that Michael couldn't talk to his team and manager about taking risks.
He has some idea that the problem is because of cultural differences but he doesn't know how to go about getting into it. One factor in the reluctance to initiate meaningful intercultural interactions is that people don't have the skill to do so.

Rosalyn: I feel sorry for Michael. He is in a tough situation.

Needed: Performance Models for Addressing Cultural Differences

Paul: One reason for this skill gap is the lack of models – other people who demonstrate this ability and from whom we can observe and learn. I was thinking of the "kitchen table effect" the other day. Whenever my parents had an issue to discuss, they would sit at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and talk it out. They would say to us kids that it is all right to sit at the table, but you need to be quiet if you do. Of course it wasn't conscious, but this was a very big learning experience for our future adult relationships. Similarly, when we get to the workplace there are all kinds of interactions from which we learn. Who hasn't been influenced in their management style by a previous manager with whom they had a good relationship? But who has witnessed proactive and open discussions about cultural difference?

Rosalyn: Do you think that some people just naturally have the ability to communicate with other cultures, including recognizing and discussing cultural differences?

Needed: Consciousness-Raising

Paul: An intercultural trainer friend of mine, Reinart, was telling me that one of the main problems with working interculturally is that most people in global organizations over-emphasize cultural similarities to the detriment of recognizing the differences. There is actually a pretty well-known model of intercultural competence development that helps us to understand this minimizing dynamic. It was originally developed as the the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). That model has been adjusted somewhat and is now known as the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC) and the assessment that measures one's developmental stage is called the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). What I found powerful about this model is that first of all, it helps everyone to understand that it is indeed developmental. Just as Jean Piaget helped us to understand child cognitive development, the developers of the intercultural competence model – primarily Mitch Hammer and Milton Bennett – have done the same thing with intercultural competence development. With adequate intercultural interaction and facilitated intercultural learning, anyone can develop their intercultural competence. However, if you are in what they call the minimization orientation, you can't really see cultural differences yet and part of the barrier is that you tend to focus too much on similarities instead of focusing on both similarities and differences. I'm thinking too that this orientation is seductive because if you believe that everyone in the world is basically the same, then there is nothing to work on or struggle with – you know, it's all fuzzy and warm with a bowl of granola to munch on. The thing is too that when people are in minimization, It's one of those "you don't know that you don't know" situations.

Rosalynn: Yea, well if I found out I was in minimization I would probably do what I could to stay in it so that my work could be as warm and fuzzy as possible…….(chuckling)

Paul: So, it seems that the skills and process that can be acted out between cultures to make cultural difference discussions safe and productive would help to develop people's overall intercultural competence level.   The skills and process need to be something that would be universal – the same process across cultures, functions, industries, organizations, etc.

Rosalynn: So Paul I think there is another thing that can help with discussing cultural differences. I am going to a training session next week that is about working with global teams. As part of it, we are going to be taking an online assessment that helps us to understand our preferred cultural work styles. That will create a common means through which we can all communicate about our differences.

Paul: Yes, I have experienced that session also. Self-assessments are OK and, as you say, create a common language with which to talk. One weakness with them I see is that they sometimes aren't able to transfer this ability to talk about their cultural preference difference into contexts when they aren't actually using the self-assessment instrument. Also, when people learn those cultural dimensions, they often don't have a good understanding of all of the specific behaviors that are driven by each of the value dimensions.

Rosalynn: Yes, I suppose so. I'll see next week.

Paul: Hey, you and Jayla from HR are friends, right?

Rosalynn: Well, not close friends, but yea, we get along pretty well.

Paul: I would say that here at our corporate office we have only a small percentage of African-Americans working here. Have you ever asked Jayla what it feels like as an African-American to work in a company so dominated by white Americans?

Rosalynn: Ah...

Paul: You look a little taken aback Ros....

Rosalynn: Why would I go around trying to emphasize the differences between us? How is that productive? Besides, she seems to be perfectly happy in her job. I don't see that there are any big differences between her and the rest of the team.

Paul: I can imagine that she is happy in her job. There are a lot of criteria for job satisfaction. But what I am digging into is that your relationship with her and any work you do together might become even better from understanding your cultural differences and seeing if there are any ways that you might change your behaviors in order to be better friends. I think it goes for any relationship really....how can it get into depth unless you have some differences with each other and work with each other to reconcile the differences. You know the old adage, "you should never marry someone with whom you've never had an argument."

Rosalynn: Yea, I guess that is akin to "don't trust your hormones...." But what are you saying now...that we should pick fights with our intercultural partners so that we can work better together?

Paul: No, on the contrary my dear (giving it his best upper-class British accent). I mean that we should get to know each other's differences exactly so that we don't get into fights. First of all, the similarities will take care of themselves so we can leave them alone. If attention isn't paid to the differences then the work can sometimes be impeded. For example, African-American culture generally tends to place a higher value on direct communication than white mainstream culture. Part of the African-American directness is a more emotional expression. My trainer friend Reinart told me that he has had African-American colleagues express to him that they sometimes feel kind of discouraged from following their cultural value of more direct communication. They say that in African-American culture if you are a member of a group not only should you express disagreement, it is your obligation. If they do follow their cultural norm they sometimes get feedback from their white mainstream manager that they are being too argumentative and confrontational. So, their morale and motivation is negatively affected. The problem is that the white mainstream manager is seeing this action on the part of his African-American employees from his own cultural lens. If they had a way and the skills to discuss their cultural differences and expectations that arise from them, then they could prevent the kind of tension that exists in their group. Maybe you could ask Jayla about this issue.

Rosalyn: Well, I don't know. I think things are going pretty well with our group.

Paul: I think that we white Americans; including myself as much as anyone, don't really understand how African-American culture is different from our white culture – at least white mainstream culture. I just think that the cultural differences may be something Jayla deals with all day and every day and maybe she just does things the white mainstream way to make things easier. After all, if she is always so much in the

minority, what else can she do? Reinart told me there is a very good book on this matter entitled <u>Black and White Styles in Conflict</u> by Thomas Kochman.

Rosalyn: That sounds good. I will look into that book and maybe ask Jayla if she has read it.

Paul: We are at a significant time in world history – globalization brings the need for deeper levels of relationship – not just to improve intercultural relations, but to adapt behavior to be more successful.

Well, it's been good talking Rosalyn. I'll see you later.