

# FROM SURPRISE TO NORMALISE: HOW CAN WE BECOME CULTURALLY INTELLIGENT?

Surprises can reveal much about culture. In this article, **Nippin Anand** gives a maritime example that made him challenge his assumptions.

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It's 19:30 and four officers including the captain appear in the ship's messroom. The captain rings a hand bell to call the messman and asks him to serve them food. As the messman is leaving, the captain says, *“Edvin, turn off the music in the galley, don't you see we are eating.”* The dinner timing onboard the ship lasts between 17:30-18:30 but Edvin later tells me that this has become an everyday affair. The music helps him unwind after a long day at sea, but he agreed that it could be a nuisance for someone who wants to enjoy their meal. As someone visiting the ship, I was left shocked and surprised by this experience.

When I look back more than a decade, this is a good example of a cultural indicator – that which is considered normal within a group (team, community, subgroup, another part of the organisation or another country) but surprises the outsider. A surprise is when our expectations are violated or something unexpected occurs and we struggle to make sense of it.

In all cultural dynamics, there are dominant groups and subservient groups. The dominant group – whose purpose is being served by the cultural indicator – will defend it as a matter of necessity (for example quoting a rule or a process) or utility (convenience). The subservient group that bears the consequences accepts it as a norm. I

call it the *OK threshold* – the point up to which we have no desire to challenge status for the effort it would require. The captain defended the decision for eating outside the dinner timings because of the ship's hectic schedule. The mess man, on the other hand, does not see how raising a concern would change anything in his favour.

## Making the Strange Familiar

As leaders, managers, investigators, and auditors, there are many instances when our expectations are proven wrong, and we are left surprised. Sometimes the language, behaviour, habits and heuristics of familiar people can surprise us, for instance when we meet people from another subculture (people from another village, suburb, regional offices, departments, management levels). How do we respond in those moments? Typically, our reaction to surprise is to make the strange familiar and close the gap between our expectations and experience. For example, we may have an ideal image about how a ship captain should interact with his crew and, upon witnessing a crew member being treated with disrespect, we may dismiss this as a one-off or simply downplay it as someone having a bad day. We are quick to make the strange familiar and in so doing, we lose the discriminatory details of our experience.

On the other hand, being too inquisitive about our surprises may not be an option either. If I questioned the captain for too long or challenged his perspective about a practice that has become accepted in this culture, chances are I will soon find myself outside of this group. I would be kept at a distance within the formal confines of a guest visitor. Culture is all about belonging and identity. If belonging to this culture is crucial for my survival (because I need to revisit the ship at a future stage or at least maintain a working relationship), I must find a way to align with the practices of this culture or come to terms with their 'normal'. That is the power of culture. To belong to a group, we often adapt our habits, language, gestures, and tone, and in most instances this happens unconsciously.

## The Unconscious Mind

Another mistake we often make is seeing surprises as a symptom of behavioural problems (bad captain-submissive messman) and soon we want to conduct 'speak up' training and leadership courses.

We rarely question ourselves about the 'OK threshold'. Why have the norms that took us by surprise been accepted by the ship's crew? How long has this norm continued without being challenged? As we are wrestling within to make

sense of our surprises, it is convenient to create villains and heroes in our organisations. But such outcomes of social injustice are often the result of deeper cultural problems.

When I engaged with the crew onboard, I did not hear anything negative about the captain. To the contrary, I was told that this was a kind-hearted captain who would go out of his way to help his crew. It became clear that this was more than just a leadership problem. The fact that both the captain and the messman had normalised this experience in their world shows that normalisation is neither deliberate nor conscious. It is a byproduct of the history and legacy of the group. At some stage, someone may have started this practice out of a genuine need or a pragmatic solution to a persistent problem but over time this has become an automatic and implied expectation.

Once automaticity kicks in, anyone who joins the group will conform to the existing rules of that group. When a new crew member sees Edwin in the messroom outside of duty hours serving food to the officers – day in and day out – he or she will automatically accept this as the ‘ground reality’. It takes a lot of courage to challenge a norm that is unconsciously accepted by the group. Do you notice a paradox here? It is the habits of the group that attract others to participate in the group. How can someone from within disapprove a norm or a practice that gives solidarity to the group? The acclaimed sociologist and a pioneer in cultural studies Pierre Bourdieu called it *habitus* (habit-us). It is a habit that we do without knowing why we do it.

### On Becoming Culturally Intelligent

How do we manage the tension between ‘surprise’ and ‘normalise’? And more importantly, how can we become culturally intelligent from our own surprises?

We might learn how to spot cultural indicators as an outsider in a group. For operational personnel, this may happen when swapping shifts or changing shift patterns, when becoming a manager, or when working in other organisational




functions, such as safety management. Each has different cultural indicators.

When you are surprised about something while others are not, it is important that you hold on to your perspective. More specifically, do not rush to close the gap between your expectations and experiences. But at the same time, do not become too excited about it. There is a delicate balance between making the strange familiar and making the familiar strange. Managing this balance is the starting point to becoming culturally intelligent.

As in this example, your surprises may lead you into different directions. On the face of it, the captain may seem disrespectful, but no one really supported this view. That brings us to another important lesson in cultural intelligence – enjoy the ambiguities and welcome indecisiveness. All cultural indicators originate from the unconscious and surfacing the unconscious requires us to challenge our deeply held assumptions, entertain doubt, and revisit our worldviews. That is learning in true sense.

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If you are fortunate to win the trust of the group (and the group leader), share your understanding about what you have learned about their culture. All learning begins from within. A good place to start when you share your observations with the group is how your surprises have challenged your own worldview.

Be mindful that you are surfacing norms and practices that have become embodied in the group’s language, symbols, habits, heuristics, and it is part of the group’s history. Being empathetic, humble, and open-minded about your observations is a crucial skill for winning trust and enabling change. 



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