

## **One Man's Pathway to Understanding How to Bridge Cultural Chasms: Experience, Question, Study, and Reform Understanding**

Dr. Leif Olsen, a Swede by birth, has become a knowledgeable citizen of the world who appreciates that connecting with others requires understanding first why others think as they do. Living in Thailand with his Vietnamese wife, he is reminded of that lesson daily. From long professional and personal experience, he knows that it is not countries but the premises from our different cultural backgrounds that separate us.

Dr. Olsen learned that lesson through many years of working on corporate mergers and acquisitions, financial sector development, management training, and industrial sector sales within cultures other than that of his native Sweden. Since leaving his studies at the University of Stockholm's faculty of business administration, Dr. Olsen worked extensively as a management consultant, manager-for-hire, and management training consultant in Japan, the United States, Eastern Europe, Vietnam, and Malaysia often being an intermediary between organizations from at least two different cultures. He eventually became aware of how culturally based assumptions blocked mutual understanding and multilateral cooperation. Many people were stopping at knowing *what* someone said or thought, rather than pressing on to find out *why* the person thought that way. Listeners stop from learning more because they assume full comprehension of *what* has been communicated.

An example of how culturally based assumptions impede cooperation drawn from his book, *Traffic: A Book About Culture* (Raider Publishing International, 2005), is the 1992-1997 project initiated and bankrolled by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), implemented by the World Bank, and hosted by the State Bank of Vietnam, to improve the Vietnamese banking sector. The project was not a success.

While the people involved shared a common language about the end result to be accomplished (a more efficient banking system), the parties were in fact divided by basic premises about the scope of the task. Based on analyzing written statements concerning what changes were needed, SIDA assumed this also meant that the Vietnamese would allow free market reforms that were beyond their political control, while the World Bank assumed that a better banking system meant totally replacing the Marxist economy. The Vietnamese, however, believed that a market economy could be created while the banking system was still totally managed and controlled by the Stalinist state. As you can imagine, there was no common ground for defining -- and even less implementing -- a project that could succeed in

improving efficiency in the banking system. Had the opposing positions been understood and accommodated into some new consensus, progress could have been made.

How did Dr. Olsen become a world-recognized authority on how to avoid those misunderstandings? Frustrated with the repeated problems that arose from cultural norms, he decided to retire from management and consulting to explore the subject of culture as an influence on cooperation.

How do you learn how to analyze culture's impact on cooperation? In Dr. Olsen's case, there was no model ... he needed to invent one. While many had studied the qualities of a given culture, very few -- if any -- had looked at how to study cultures as phenomena.

Finding that traditional universities wanted him to focus on and follow their predetermined formats for study, an impossibly narrow focus for such a broad topic, Dr. Olsen discovered Rushmore University, an online school that allowed for much freedom in academic studies. Unlike other universities he considered, Rushmore let him choose his advisor and design interdisciplinary research and courses for studying culture as a phenomenon. Wanting to publish a book based on his research, Dr. Olsen designed a series of custom courses that allowed him to advance his understanding, create an analytical approach, and write a dissertation and book at the same time. Dr. Olsen also appreciated Rushmore openness in letting someone who had not finished a bachelor's degree study for a Ph.D. in international relations. Despite having decades of valuable experience in multilateral cooperation, many universities consider only academic qualifications in considering candidates for degrees.

Studying thousands of pages of project documentation, Dr. Olsen soon pinpointed expressions like "common sense," "normal," and "obvious" -- often used by politicians, economists and business people alike -- taking on an altogether new meaning when employed by those from diverse cultures. The "new meaning" is that just about anything can be considered "common sense" or "obvious" if and when the underlying premises are mutually shared. Most of us are not even aware of which premises we use when drawing conclusions from observations - and even fewer of us realize how culturally derived most of these premises are. The core component of Dr. Olsen's summary "formula" for how cultural influences affect our behavior states that Observation + Premise = Conclusion. Once any statement or action can be broken down into its factual and cultural components, it can be analyzed and the effects of culture on our ways of arguing can be understood.

I asked Dr. Olsen how earning his Ph.D. has affected him. Here is what he told me:

“The Ph.D. as such is fun to have, and it raises eyebrows among certain groups of people. However, I am quite uninterested in titles and hierarchies. I prefer to be called by name. But doing the research itself changed my life for the good. Realizing how little you know -- and even less before starting the research -- is a humbling experience.”

Since graduating in 2005, Dr. Olsen has served as President/Chairman of the Thai-Swedish Chamber of Commerce. In that role he has helped the members improve trade relations, as well as reducing organizational friction based on cultural misunderstandings. He is currently planning to continue his research efforts, now targeting the controversial issue of culture's influence on governance in corporate as well as in political life. Dr. Olsen was also invited to join Rushmore University as an associate professor, where I am pleased to have him as a colleague.

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Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

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