

What the locals eat

Peter Drucker famously quipped “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Culture, in his case, means organizational culture. Yet, Stephen Miles’ presentation has us realizing “local” culture has the same power.

Our interconnectedness, the economies of scale that spread our supply chain further abroad and the global migration of talent means even the smallest business can find opportunity internationally. This is, literally, moving out of your comfort zone — where you, your talent, customers and suppliers all have a common understanding of how to do business.

As we reach beyond our comfort zone, it seems inevitable that we stumble into a fish-out-of-water comedy of misunderstandings and



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unintended offence, where crazy foreigners drive on the “wrong” side of the road, we worry how deeply we should bow and ask, “What do you mean dinner starts at 10 p.m.?”

Despite the comedy, each of these mishaps can have an impact on organizational effectiveness, with local culture nibbling on, or in some cases wolfing down, your strategy.

To minimize the impact and leverage the opportunity, Miles suggests we go out into the world recalling three pillars of cultural sensitivity: awareness that cultural differences abound; appreciation for those differences and a willingness to understand their role in local culture; and engagement — a willingness to participate in those differences.

Miles’ presentation failed to point out we needn’t travel far to find use for cultural appreciation, awareness and engagement. Customers or talent may be found in ethnically

defined clusters such as Richmond, B.C., Brampton, Ont., or the Avalon Peninsula, N.L. “Time” in Vancouver means something different in Toronto. “Work” means something different to millennials than to boomers. Marketing and sales are always at each other’s throats.

If local culture eats strategy for breakfast, then to succeed in the world of business, international or otherwise, we had better know what the locals eat for breakfast.

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