

THE ACCIDENTAL BUSINESS NOMAD

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR WORKING
ACROSS A SHRINKING PLANET



KYLE D. HEGARTY

Praise for

The Accidental Business Nomad

“In an age when the time to read books is getting fierce competition from the magnetic pull of the mobile screen, we need to know that a book we are thinking of picking up is really worth reading. This book is! Beautiful writing. Important message. Relevant topic. And did I say beautifully written? Read it.”

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“Kyle Hegarty’s new book, *The Accidental Business Nomad*, is definitely in the can’t-put-it-down category. Hegarty engages the reader in some of the most complex communication issues of our global economy. He takes us from culture shock to cultural competency with colorful examples that make us laugh and cringe at the same time. Using his extensive business experience in Asia, he highlights the cross-cultural challenges involved in working globally and take us from ignorance to mastery. His entertaining style uses the power of storytelling and the expertise of academic research to engage and educate. Hegarty defuses the multiple landmines of globalization that too often remain invisible to aspiring businesses and account for their failure.”

—Deborah Levine, founder and editor-in-chief of the *American Diversity Report*

“Cultural differences, which may be charming on holiday, are far less so when your salary depends on understanding them. There is no substitute for doing your research, but in this easy to read account of his struggles, [Kyle] generously allows the reader to learn from his own mistakes—and hopefully make less of their own.”

—Patti McCarthy, author of *Cultural Chemistry: Simple Strategies for Bridging Cultural Gaps*

“A much-needed survival guide for any global leader who has left a board meeting, team call or conversation feeling like they didn’t hit the mark.”

—Diana Wu David, author of *Future Proof*

“Wise and funny, this book is packed with sage advice and keen insights gained from the author’s hard-won experience.”

—Henry Laurence, associate professor of Government at Bowdoin College

The Accidental Business Nomad

**A Survival Guide for Working
Across a Shrinking Planet**

Kyle D. Hegarty



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To my father. The real international entrepreneur of the family

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Author's Note

We use generalizations all the time to describe groups of people. “The Chinese exchange business cards with two hands,” “tech companies are always doing things this way,” “men always say things like that,” “well, she’s a millennial, so...” and so on. There’s a fine line between constructive generalizing and malicious stereotyping. The problem is knowing where the line is. Here’s an example.

I led a workshop in Mumbai where the organizer said the day would start at 8 am. Yeah, right. Nothing in India starts on time, certainly not 8 am. I rolled in at 8:15 to find a room packed with attendees patiently waiting for me. Ugh. I was guilty of taking a generalization about the lack of timeliness in India and converting it into a stereotype. I didn’t mean to, but I did.

This book is about what it’s like doing business across the globe and across cultures. One of the big conclusions I draw is that data-driven generalizations about different working styles can help people understand and adjust to different work situations. There is data that shows that India is more time-flexible than the US. We can probably agree on this. But it doesn’t mean you should show up late.

This is tricky, and I dig into these broad generalizations a lot. There are also characters here who clearly stereotype. I mention this as a warning that what follows at times crosses that line between generalizations (helpful) and stereotypes (unhelpful/hurtful). Sometimes it is deliberate to make a point, other times I’ve made a mistake.

The point is, it is an important topic and one we should embrace if we're going to figure out how to work together effectively.

Several of the characters throughout these stories tend to drink too much and behave in questionable ways. Male-dominated work cultures and the “old boys club” mentality still exist. These are issues that need to be discussed more openly if progress is to be made. Colorful characters like these are a reality, and despite their behavior, we can learn from them. I also occasionally write out accents whether they are American, Taiwanese, Australian, or another. I do this to help bring out a character, not make fun of anyone. I also use humor, sarcasm, and occasional vulgarity, which many cross-cultural professionals advise against. I have ignored that advice.

Finally, there are a lot of stories here where people and companies would prefer to remain anonymous, so the names and details for most of these incidents have been changed to protect the guilty.

With that said, let's get on with this adventure...

Introduction

I'm in an overpriced global coffee shop chain in Singapore. The shop's products are the same as back home—the look, feel, and smell of the place is universal. For some, it's globalization at its finest. For others, it's a dystopian nightmare of bland corporate uniformity, yet for many it's just a coffee shop.

A small group of businesspeople place their order. Then one man—British, balding—throws a monkey wrench into the entire operation. He tries to order off the menu.

“You can only order from the menu,” replies the barista.

“Of course, that's not a problem, just charge me for it. I'm supposed to dissolve this medicine into hot water, so I just need a cup of hot water,” he said holding up a small white packet with a prescription stuck to it.

“Sorry, has to be from the menu.”

“Mate,” he says in a British way that means the barista is anything but his mate. He continues through slightly gritted teeth. “I'm happy to pay for it. I need to take this medicine.”

“Cannot.”

The British man is now *screaming on the inside*.

Screaming on the inside. It's a wonderful phrase to describe any moment of peak frustration where you are backed into a corner. In your mind, that corner has been forced by interaction that was entirely avoidable.

The British man would like to scream on the outside, but he's with his work colleagues and he's trying to hold it together.

Thankfully, a woman in his group interjects and addresses the barista. "He'll have a tea. Earl Gray. Please keep the tea bag on the side."

The barista smiles. This order can be processed. The hot water problem has been solved. His medicine can now be dissolved.

This example may sound trite—unless you're standing in line behind the man. And it may be trite, at least on the surface. But if you step back and think from a global perspective, the example suddenly becomes more meaningful, symbolic, and informative. At least, it did to me, and I think it might to you, too. It offers one of many subtle yet critical lessons about business in the global economy.

This book grew out of a few simple questions:

If I could go back a decade, what would I tell my younger, less gray-haired self as I was setting up a business in Asia—or anywhere outside of Europe or Japan? What are the warnings? What do I need to avoid? What advice would my younger self hear but then ignore?

The next question became, how would I explain this stuff to someone who hasn't gone through it yet? There are cultural differences across the globe that our senses pick up: language, food, rituals. But there are a lot more invisible differences our senses don't immediately register: unspoken rules, roles, beliefs, and values.

How do you explain to someone from the United States that the idea of individual liberty is not a universal value? Democracy? A lot of people on this planet don't believe in it. Equality? Meh. Privacy? Not here. You get the picture. There are people who may instead prioritize concepts like seniority—hierarchy—as a core tenet and who believe the group takes priority over any one individual. But a majority of business books, trainings and management ideas have been created in places like the US, where ideas such as individualism and equality are assumed. If a majority of the planet doesn't behave that way, what happens when a bunch of differing values come into contact? What happens when you apply pressure like tight deadlines or millions of dollars? Things get intense fast.

Take one example of how people communicate. It varies widely. For example, ask a New Yorker to borrow money and he may say no. While someone from London may respond “we’ll see” and in Japan it may be a yes. The end answer in all three cases is the same. You aren’t getting that money. Confusing, right? Nearly everyone thinks their way is the right way. They are all right. Globally, they are all wrong.

I take this personally because these issues nearly bankrupted my company, cost me and my clients millions of dollars, and drove me to the point where I was ready to give up and become a barista for the rest of my life.

All because I am an accidental business nomad.

My “10 years ago self” saw what looked like a great opportunity, and I jumped on it. And jumped where the opportunity was—Asia. My business quickly expanded across ten countries in four continents, and then I tried to force fit a uniform global standard onto clients who very much wanted and needed a local standard. The only thing faster than the growth was the collapse.

As I picked up the pieces from my own business, I started asking myself some hard questions. What happened? What went wrong? What would I do differently? Every answer had one common denominator. Culture. Culture affects businesses as they expand around the world. As I wrestled through this tricky topic, it became clear that many others were struggling with this as well. I soon saw my losses were nothing compared to other businesses. Some completely failed, while others muddled through it. A tiny few seemed to naturally figure things out.

As globalization continues to accelerate, more people are wrestling with similar challenges. Technology has taken businesses across borders, but bringing people together causes culture clashes to expand. Technology quickly erases geographical borders, but in many ways cultural borders become magnified.

Recently, I did a workshop with a team of executives from around the world, and we spent time talking about *beliefs* and *values*. Many

companies have a *values statement* or something similar. What's yours? More important, how does a company have a values statement if people around the world don't share the same values? Or, suppose they share those values, but they *express* them differently?

Here's an example: a team agreed that *honesty* and *respect* were two core values that the company and their team held in high regard. Wonderful, you might say. You see? People around the world do share similar values. We are all one global village.

But wait, how do each of the people in that room *express* those values? How do you show respect? What does honesty mean?

One of the British managers spoke up. He led a global marketing team scattered across five continents. His company was launching a marketing campaign driving people to attend a coffee or tea meeting to learn more about his company's products. The plan was for all markets to launch the campaign at the same time to keep things organized and consistent. But he tried to be flexible from a cultural standpoint. Some countries prefer tea, others coffee—this is a cultural difference we can all see, and in this case, taste. Countries can choose. They would rewrite the invite accordingly.

Meanwhile, his Malaysian employee knows this plan won't work in Malaysia. But the employee goes along with it anyway. He doesn't speak up.

Why? Because he's honoring the core values—respect and honesty—set by the team. Where he comes from, it is disrespectful to challenge and push back on someone more senior. Showing respect is honest. His version of the value statement has been fulfilled.

But why won't the coffee or tea meeting work in Malaysia?

It's Ramadan. In Malaysia, most of the target audience can eat and drink only after the sun sets. Daylight is for fasting. Inviting people out for coffee or tea is not only a waste of time, it's showing a complete lack of understanding of local customs. If a company doesn't know about Ramadan, how would they know about helping local clients and their local challenges? The campaign is an embarrassment in Malaysia—an expensive embarrassment.

The British manager is screaming on the inside. Why didn't his Malaysian employee speak up? The manager thinks his employee is incompetent, useless. He broke the team's core values statement. What happened to honesty and respect? The manager is quietly putting a plan together to find a replacement for this team member.

Who's right here? Who's wrong?

This is one small and, yes, real example of misunderstandings that happen across global teams. Miscommunication also happens through the *lack* of communicating, like what happened here. Some theories help explain what's happening. We can look at ideas on how to overcome them as well, and we will do that in later chapters.

On a trip back to the United States recently, I brought up this Malaysia example during a workshop on behavioral profiling. Everyone in the room perked up. They were experiencing new and similar frustrations, not necessarily with Malaysia, but this story sounded a lot like the new challenges they were wrestling with in places like Russia, Brazil, India, China, and even the United Kingdom. In fact, they were having trouble defining the issues in the first place. The first conclusion is usually, "Well, this person doesn't know what he is doing," and, "People over there don't really 'get it.'"

In fact, the problem is the exact opposite. The person is doing what he or she has been culturally programmed to do. Cultures vary, and failing to understand or appreciate that fact is where problems start.

That is when it hit me. Situations like these are no longer isolated moments unique to a small group of expat managers. Cultural misunderstandings happen much more frequently today. Because of communication technology and the digital economy, global business-people no longer need a well-worn passport to work internationally. Understanding international communication isn't just for multinationals, start-ups, freelancers, or small businesses—everyone is now working across the planet. We're all global now. We're all foreigners.

Many of us have jumped at opportunities for global work adventures, while others have been more reluctant. Regardless, the global workforce is here, and it brings with it a new set of challenges.

You might think the large global companies that have done this for decades have figured it out. They have not. The ongoing collapse of distance has opened vast opportunities but also vast challenges for companies of all sizes. Some expensive challenges, some deadly, some stupidly funny.

There are many more *screaming on the inside* moments occurring. Understand what causes these situations, and you'll begin to crack the code of communicating globally. Fortunately, there are a lot of tools and ideas that can help, and we'll explore many of them in depth in the forthcoming pages. You'll figure out how to navigate these invisible global obstacles and how to build stronger relations that will help you to advance moments of true innovation. I have added a few tips at the end of each chapter as a starting point. Many of the concepts are simple, but actually doing them is hard and takes practice. Working globally can be wildly frustrating and overwhelming, but it is often these very moments that, if handled correctly can turn into great opportunities and unexpected bursts of innovation and creativity. We're all business nomads now, so let's figure this out together.

Chapter 1

Into the Den of Slap Dragons

“Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

—George Bernard Shaw

Businesses continue to lose a ton of money and opportunities overseas because they can't accept that their way may not always be the right way. The first step to succeed in a global environment is to realize that you don't know what you don't know. Only then will the world open up its opportunities.

REMEMBER THE FIRST time I walked into this bar about 15 years ago with a power adapter in my hand and thinking that while nothing else had gone well earlier in the day, I had at least figured out the power plug situation. My computer was out of battery, and the Singapore wall outlets didn't work with my American plug. I kept forgetting to bring an adapter with me and ended up buying several. To this day, I have baskets filled with the things. My baggy suit was drenched with sweat from wandering around in the tropical heat. I came to the bar to meet a guy named Stu, an Australian, living here in Singapore.

Overheated and underwhelmed with my current work situation, it had been a frustrating day. I discovered that the team of 10 callers I had hired a few weeks earlier had not made a single phone call in the past five days. Their job was to cold call thousands of companies and try to sell tech products from a number of different clients. They should have been averaging 100 calls a day—at least! The reason for the lack of calls was apparently my fault. I had given them unclear instructions when I had asked them to hold off calling for one specific client. They interpreted that as holding off calling for *all* clients. The team leader did not understand why I was so upset when I arrived in the office to find the group doing no work. How did this happen? I didn't know, but I was convinced I had hired a bunch of idiots. After complaining about the situation to a friend, he put me in touch with Stu.

I found two guys sitting at a small table in the crowded pub. They introduced themselves as Stu and Smitty. I had told Stu earlier that drinks were on me, and now it looked like I was covering his friend as well.

This would be the first of many after-work meetups, where people working for global companies would get together, compare war stories, commiserate, celebrate, and generally try to figure out how

to work across a shrinking planet—or at least get drunk trying. It was a lesson in global leadership, barroom style.

I ordered three beers for the table and the waiter replied, “It’s one-for-one.” This was a happy hour promotion found throughout Singapore and other nearby countries.

“OK. As I said, we’ll have three beers, please.” I was slightly annoyed with the waiter. After all, it had been a long day, and now I had to decode whatever “one-for-one” meant. I looked at my new colleagues for confirmation I was doing the right thing, but they stared back at me stone-faced.

I hadn’t been in the region long but was beginning to realize I was in over my head. Things were different than I had expected, but it was hard to define what those differences were. Sure, the cars driving on the other side of the road, the languages, and the power sockets were different. These things that could be seen and heard were easy, but they weren’t the real obstacles to working in other parts of the world. I was beginning to realize that it was the invisible stuff that caused the real problems.

* * *

I didn’t understand at the time, but this meetup was intended to help me understand these invisible things.

“Welcome to the land of grizzled and bitter expats,” Stu said in his thick Australian accent. “Hopefully we can give you some pointers to make life a little easier.”

Stu was well liked around town. His parents moved to Sydney from Taiwan before he was born. He grew up in Australia and was as Australian as it gets. His passion for watching cricket was matched only by his love of Vegemite. He has been known to lecture his foreign friends on why the Australian band Midnight Oil is one of the most important bands ever. “Evah.” A few years ago, his company gave him a major promotion and sent him to Singapore to run their Asia operations. There were people more qualified, but Stu was of

Asian heritage. And this was the reason he got the job, because his corporate bosses thought he looked the part. “Funny thing is, I know a little bit about Taiwan because of my parents, but that place is 2,000 miles away from Singapore and a totally different market. My Asian looks didn’t help much once I got here.”

The waiter returned with six pints of beer. “Um, I only ordered three,” I said. “One-for-one,” responds the waiter, “three beers,” pointing at the six glasses before disappearing into the crowd.

I remember staring at the table, dumbfounded, while Smitty dove in for his two pints and Stu laughed. Annoyed, I asked, “What the hell does ‘one-for-one’ mean?”

“It means ‘two for the price of one,’ mate,” said Smitty in a gravelly East London accent. After an unnaturally long pull of his beer he continued, “You ordered three drinks. Since it’s one-for-one, that means you get two of everything. It’s just how things are done around here.”

“Why would he pour us six beers? There are three of us sitting here,” I was screaming on the inside. “Your first lesson has begun!” Stu raised his glass to make a toast. “I wish all our mistakes were this tasty!”

With my six pints, I had stumbled into a lesson on communicating across cultures. Regardless of what words get said, the important thing is what the other person *perceives*. In my case, the waiter perceived that I understood the meaning of one-for-one. Communication breakdowns happen between everyone, even people who know each other well. Misunderstandings multiply between people who come from entirely different places. These can lead to big mistakes. Or in this case, tasty ones.

Smitty *was* grizzled and he was nearly finished with his first pint already. He was a project manager for a giant construction company, and he had been in Asia forever. He sounded as if he had been in this bar all afternoon, which was not going to help his sporadic bouts of gout. Smitty was the guy in sketchy bars, with beer dribbling down

his faded Hawaiian shirt, watching the world go by. But he was no slouch. During the workweek he was a high-functioning employee, respected by most of his colleagues and, as I would learn later, one of the most dependable people in the region. Smitty has seen it all and done it all. He knew how to get things done across the region. He was a doer.

Smitty managed people all around the region, from Australia to India. Locals around the planet get frustrated with foreign managers who come in and do things their own way, but Smitty wasn't like that. He watched what was going on around him and learned from it. Most important, he got results. The way he got results wasn't always pretty. The way he solved problems wouldn't get written up in business school case studies. But he made things happen, and when executives came in trying to apply foreign solutions to local problems, he was the one who kept things from imploding.

Locals in Singapore have a nickname for Western executives. They're called "seagulls." These were big, often white birds who flap down from out of the sky, make a lot of noise, crap all over the place, and then fly away. I had certainly made a few messes already, largely because I was clueless. But I had plenty of company.

The four phases of learning to work globally

The first lesson I had to learn when working in Asia was that I didn't know what was going on. It took me a while to realize how little I knew. Thankfully, I wasn't alone. This was a difficult first lesson to accept. In fact, some never accept it. It was only when something bad happened that people realized they were in over their heads. Here is the learning curve everyone goes through when working in foreign markets:

Phase one: You have no idea what is going on and you don't realize it—so you do things the way you've always done them. Business as usual. This is what I had done with my local team when I told them to stop working on the newest campaign. I handled that situation the way I would have back in the United States.

Phase two: You realize you have no idea what is going on because what you're doing isn't working.

Phase three: You begin to learn how to handle situations in new ways. You practice, you screw up, you try again.

Phase four: You figure it out and can navigate any global situation. One-for-one's all night long.

After my first month in Singapore, I was firmly stuck in phase one. I had learned how to build teams back in the United States that were effective, and I was here to do the same in Asia. I thought that my way was the right way because it had worked back home. That's why I was here, and that's why clients were hiring me. As I chatted with Stu and Smitty over our beers, I began to realize I was out of my depth in Asia. That meeting marked my transition from phase one to phase two. I was reluctantly beginning to understand I didn't know what I was doing. The more stubborn and headstrong the person, the harder it is to break out of phase one.

My pride was hurt. I found myself lost and confused, officially in that second phase. Not only that, I was despondent. The biggest irony of working overseas became clear—the leadership skills that got me here were now somehow causing me to fail in these new markets.

Stu and Smitty were embedded in phase three, learning and figuring out how to work across diverse situations. The people sitting around that expat bar were all working through these challenges. I would learn that many of the people with experience working overseas did not know how to properly explain what they were going

through. Instead, it turned into rough versions of barroom anecdotes and on-the-fly tips and tricks. Over the years I would discover a better way.

Phase three was all about collecting tools and techniques to navigate these challenges. Phase four was mastery. This was where a person could use these tools without having to think about them. They could adjust to situations automatically. To this day, I have only met one person who has reached this phase. His name is Axel, and you will meet him later.

The people here were all players in a game of globalization that has accelerated during the past few decades. We came overseas because we were looking for something. We were chasing a dream of winning globally. Thousands of companies have expanded overseas during the past few years, racing to get their piece of the growing global pie and spending tons of money in the process. From the largest multinationals down to the start-ups, everyone seemed to be going global. This meant more people from more parts of the world were doing business together and often, they realized that there were important differences that needed to get sorted out in order to make things work.

Global success requires having grit and enjoying the ride

Everyone bought into the idea that the world had suddenly opened for business. In many ways it had. We thought that business was done the same way no matter the country; we had been told the world was flat. Yes, technology opened borders and investment led to increased levels of global integration, but those who ventured over the horizon to new markets found something else that turned out to be much more complicated. What should have been straightforward

assignments turned into mazes of miscommunication and cultural mishaps to which no one seemed to have the map.

Who wins, who loses? What are the traits of success when working in these fast-paced multicultural environments? I noticed two things right away: those who lasted and who were succeeding were tough. They had grit. Sometimes that expressed itself in less-than-politically correct ways, like Smitty. More on him and his gang later. The second trait was that they enjoyed the adventure. Those who were simply in it for the money or took all the stress of global work too seriously were usually the ones who went home empty-handed.

I didn't know it at the time, but building a roadmap to help companies and people get through this cross-cultural maze would turn into my main area of focus. How can people work effectively across a complex planet where invisible communication and working styles vary so widely? My adventure in discovering these answers was just beginning.

In the bar that night I described my business plan to Stu and Smitty. I helped companies from a wide range of industries sell more of their products and services by getting them in front of new prospects. This involved mostly cold calling but also emailing and using newer online tools to help companies sell more of their stuff. Clients had started to turn their attention to Asian markets and I had pitched myself as the guy who could help them grow around this emerging region. The marketing and sales work I had done in the United States could now be done across Asia. What should have been a plug-and-play game plan that had worked in the US was already failing miserably here in Singapore. My team of callers was not making calls, and I had begun to realize that what I had promised my clients now seemed almost impossible.

One client I had overpromised was Texas Joe. I called him "Texas Joe" because that is where he was from and from where he had no interest in leaving. Joe ran a company that sold software to banks, and somehow he landed a deal with a local bank in Singapore. This

got him excited about selling into more Asian banks, and he found and hired me to help him do it.

Joe didn't know anything about Asia, and he didn't care to learn. To him, business was business in any and every part of the world. If a bunch of Asian countries were growing their markets like crazy, then that was all he needed to know. Texas Joe believed the world would bend to his wishes if he pushed hard enough.

I had spoken with him a few nights earlier. Even with less than a week of experience in Asia, I knew more than Joe. He wanted me to send his marketing brochures out to all of the banks in Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The problem was that his material was covered in baseball images and phrases. "Cover your bases," "hit it out of the park," that kind of thing. I tried to explain that people in these countries don't play baseball and that the message would not work. That's when he got frustrated. "Slap a frigging dragon on it and that will make it Asian." That statement so eloquently captured Joe's ignorance. Putting aside the fact that it showed an appalling lack of understanding of Asians and demonstrated a truly awful level of stereotyping. (How might Joe feel if someone suggested, "Slap a frigging eagle on it and that will make it American"?) More than anything, though, it showed ignorance. I began thinking of him and anyone else who ignored cultural differences as *slap dragons*. Joe didn't care about what he didn't know, and that was an expensive combination, as I was about to learn.

Against my better judgment, I did as Joe asked. I slapped a dragon on it.

Sitting on a plastic bedsheet—at the time I was living in the cheapest hotel in town—I had found an image of a dragon online and I slapped it over the baseball players. It looked... good enough. So, it was blasted out to banks across Asia.

It was not a home run.

Texas Joe fired me a few weeks later based on the poor results. This was my first *slap dragon* moment, but I was creating new ones by the day.

Stu shook his head, unimpressed with my marketing efforts. This was not an effective example of localizing products. Smitty just laughed—clearly, he was familiar with Texas Joe—types who rocked up in Asia with utter confidence and zero knowledge. “Guys like that don’t understand the region,” he said. “If they did, they wouldn’t be making such fools of themselves.”

Smitty threw out an idea. “You get the slap dragon guy to come visit and take him to a certain bar nearby where the ladies there are *nice and friendly*.” He made crude gestures with his hands. “Then, once he gets nice and comfortable with one of the ladies—and I mean *nice* and friendly—you take him aside and whisper in his ear, ‘You just had your hands all over a *guy*, you muppet!’” He laughed at his ingenuity. “Guys like Joe don’t understand the region. If they did, they wouldn’t have their hand up men’s skirts! *That* is how you get the guys back home to understand!”

This was by no means a Smitty original, and it was not barroom bluster. It was in fact, a common maneuver pulled on visiting executives. The varied nightlife scene meant it wasn’t always easy to guess the gender or sex of the person next to you at the bar, and locals were often more than happy to help teach cocky Westerners a lesson about the big, complex world. The message was clear: *Don’t assume you know how things work around here*. This was the kind of advice that didn’t make it into many “how-to-do-business-overseas” books. But Smitty was just getting started. I would later learn that Smitty loved messing with Americans who were new in town because they tended to have less overseas experience than other Westerners. Yes, Americans were “seagulls,” but he thought of them more as “fish” because when they weren’t making noise, they were swimming around in circles, clueless. Even when they learned something, they forgot it immediately. I tried not to take this personally.

“Maybe I should tell him how we lost half a million euros trying to bribe a company up in Thailand?” Smitty said, looking at Stu, who was enjoying the banter.

Good bribery stories were the low-hanging fruit of expat lore, and I would learn later that like so many things, it was not a black-and-white issue. Standard business practices in one part of the world were illegal in others, and global organizations were constantly dancing between the various realities. Smitty's story served as a good introduction. A handful of contractors and government types in the middle-of-nowhere Thailand needed some extra encouragement to get a building project approved. Smitty was tasked with paying these guys off. But the details proved devilish. How does someone actually pay a bribe? How do they get past their company's compliance department, which needs to see documentation of all cash, especially if they are a publicly traded company? How was it done across borders? Does the cash actually go into a bag?

Smitty was up for the challenge. He worked his contacts inside his company to see if anything like this had been done before. That was met with laughter, because of course it had been done before. An offshore shell company had been set up years earlier for just such activities. There was even a Word document sitting on a company server with step-by-step details of how to pay bribes. He simply had to follow the instructions. He hired a local Thai to deliver a bag—yes there was an actual bag—of cash. The guy ran off with the money. So, he found a second guy and a second bag and a second half a million euros and tried again. And that worked.

"You lost a million euros if you include the bribe," I said, trying to redeem myself from my slap dragon project.

"Mate, the million did *exactly* what it was meant to. Best investment we made up there. If those bastards were smarter, they'd have asked us for more!"

This was the shady way of getting things done. Large multinationals all had their own Smittys operating silently within their ranks. In most parts of the so-called emerging markets, the shadow economies were more efficient than the legal channels. In India, for example, it was called "black-and-white money." Paying the black

money is usually faster and easier than paying the white, legal money. In the world according to Smitty, it was the rule of *power*, not the rule of *law*, that mattered.

But Smitty's bribery story wasn't helping me with my people problems. Here in squeaky-clean Singapore, I wasn't about to bribe my way out of my situation. So Smitty changed tactics.

"Now, China is a different world. Our global CEO was being driven to some godforsaken place to visit a manufacturing plant, and they got into a traffic accident and a local guy died. Just ran the poor bastard over. That kind of thing can end a company and land you in jail. But we had our well-paid local guide who sorted the whole thing out on the spot." The CEO supposedly watched from his car as the body was buried right there on the side of the road. "And that was the end of it."

I didn't know how to respond to any of this. This conversation had turned dark quickly.

Thai bribery, Chinese hit-and-runs, one-for-one. This really was a trial by fire.

Smitty turned serious and raised his near-empty second glass for a toast. "Welcome to the jungle, mate. You've got a lot to learn."

Speeding up by slowing down

There's an old joke where one fish asks another fish, "How's the water?" and the second fish replies, "What's water?"

I had landed in an unfamiliar pond and quickly realized that what was normal to me was not normal in other parts of the world. It was *culture shock*, and psychologists who study the phenomenon suggest it can take more than a year to work through the common phases of adjustment. It was highly likely these psychologists had never lived abroad, because in reality it took much longer.

Some people move through the learning phases faster than others. Some companies muddle through them, others don't invest the

time, money, and effort needed to survive the learning curve. Many leaders can't break out of their mental programming and see the world from wildly different angles. Few talk about it openly. Who wants to admit they are a *slap dragon*?

But there were answers to these problems. Stu and his company were one example. They seemed to have cracked the mystery, navigating the cross-cultural roadblocks that slow down or end so many other organizations. Their year-over-year double-digit growth was part of the proof.

Promoted based on a faulty assumption that his ethnicity equalled cultural understanding, Stu had been growing a successful business, winning bigger and better deals. Stu hired locals and he spent a ton of time learning about what they did in their last job. While most managers jumped right into their expectations for the future, he focused on the past. The reason he did this was to understand how the new hire got things done. He asked them about the times things went well and the times things did not go well. Once he had a clear picture of the new employee's background, he could explain things in ways that made sense to that person. He had personalized the new hire process. Time consuming, but effective.

For Stu, the wins were slow to come at first, and there were a lot of growing pains. His shop kept on top of problems quickly and did something others did not: they learned from their mistakes and spoke openly about them. On top of that, there was a company culture of brutal honesty.

"We hired Stu because he knew what he was doing and seemed to get along with people easily," his CEO told me later when I began researching global growth success stories. "So I got that right when I hired him. Then I sent him to Singapore because he looked Asian, and that was pretty stupid. So I get half marks."

That's some pretty honest self-assessment.

They also got lucky being in the right place at the right time, but, more than luck, the company gave itself enough time to figure things

out. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I just kept asking everyone questions all the time,” said Stu. “And that got other people asking questions, and we built this office where it was OK to ask questions. This prevented a lot of issues.”

Stu didn’t worry about how to *grow*, he was focused on how to manage growth in a world that was *shrinking*. He seemed to naturally grasp the fact that when people got pulled closer together, differences in working styles became more apparent. One person may want detailed instructions on a task, while another person might want the flexibility to do things their own way. Some people got loud, while others went quiet. Some were used to a workspace where the boss was always right, and others were accustomed to telling the boss what to do. Stu somehow understood this, and he was good at heading off problems before they started.

How do people new to working with people from different parts of the world avoid the mistakes I had made? How do they succeed like Stu? Was it possible to avoid these cross-cultural mishaps, or was the new global workforce destined to fall into the same mistakes again and again? Was there a shortcut to being globally ready? How do you show someone something invisible they don’t want to see? How do you tell a fish about the water?

Adaptor

Back in the bar, I was still confused by what happened with the beer order. How does ordering three beers turn into six?

I clearly remember blaming the waiter. He was an idiot, like the program manager who let my team sit around doing nothing for a week.

Stu jumped in, pointing at the drinks, “This is the same thing as your work problems. You’ve got a team that is not calling and another client telling you to slap dragons on things to make them Asian. Your

communication is not working, and you are working off of a play-book from back home.”

I felt a bit defensive. My plan was to replace the program manager who allowed the callers to do nothing with someone else. “And what happens when the new program manager does something you don’t like? Are you going to replace that person too? How about the waiter, should he get fired? How about the bartender who poured the beers? How many people are you going to replace until you find someone who you like? There’s one person responsible in these situations, my friend, and it’s you.”

This was tough advice that I did not want to hear. It was beginning to dawn on me that he was right, but it didn’t make things any easier. “If I were you,” Stu added, “I would slow everything down. Before you come in changing things, take time to learn what is going on, how things work here. Get to know the people in the office.” He picked up my power plug adapter. “This,” he said, “you can’t jam your tiny US plug into a wall outlet here and expect it to work. You need one of these. It’s the same with how you handle the people. You have to learn how to adapt.”

I was being smacked and beaten out of phase one.

“Here’s one simple trick that I guarantee will make your life easier: listen to people differently than you ever have before.” Stu elaborated, “When someone tells you something, toss it back in the form of a question to make sure you understand clearly and do it all the time.”

Smitty summoned the waiter and gave an example. “Here’s how you do it. The next time the waiter says it’s one-for-one, repeat it back as a question. ‘When you say one-for-one, can you explain that?’ That’s how you get what you want here.”

I told him I’d work on it.

“No mate, you have to practice. Now!” he smiled widely as he summoned the waiter. I had been suckered into ordering another round.

“You guys are bastards,” I said, smiling, raising my glass as a toast to my new friends.

I walked unsteadily out of the bar later that night thinking about the conversation. There was a lot to process. When my new team stopped working for five days because of unclear instructions, I had taken the critical first step of realizing that I did not know what I was up against. Clearly, working with overseas teams required new ways of approaching problems, and the world was not going to change to suit my way of doing business. I didn’t yet know exactly how to adjust, but the realization alone was a critical step.

Then there were these two wildly different personalities giving advice. Stu was telling me I had to adjust by slowing everything down, learning more about my teammates. Smitty was telling me if I wanted to get things done, I’d need to lose my naïveté because rules were different across the world. In their own ways, they were both telling me to drop my preconceived notions and open my mind to new ways of getting things done. Furthermore, I’d need to actively question everything. *Active listening*, as Stu mentioned—throwing a statement back to the speaker in the form of a question—was one of the easiest and most effective speaking techniques to clarify unclear statements. This was a critical tool for helping see the invisible obstacles lurking across the globe. It was comforting knowing there were people out there willing to help, or at least trying to help. Unfortunately, their guidance came in bits and pieces. I was going to have to struggle through all this. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was at the early stages of piecing together a series of tools that would help people quickly learn how to adapt around the world.

Outside the bar, I found an available taxi and I opened the passenger door. Wrong. It was the driver’s door. Cars drive on the other side in Singapore. Even with the things I could see it was hard to change behavior. This was going to be one hell of a ride.

Survival Guide Tips:

- ✓ To localize effectively, don't be a slap dragon. Take the time to adapt products, services and mindsets. Start by acknowledging what you don't know and question past assumptions about what you think is the right way to do things.
- ✓ To communicate effectively around the planet, use active listening. Rephrase or paraphrase anything that is unclear to better understand what is being said.