

An extract from an interview with Darrell Kofkin, Chief Executive of Global Marketing Network.

When you talk with Laxmi you just know that she's in tune with other cultures, an innate skill that's so important in today's ever flattening business world. I caught up with Laxmi in India during one of her inter-cultural awareness workshops that she runs for Indian businesses wanting to do business with the UK.

Laxmi, you describe yourself as an interculturalist. What is that?

An interculturalist is an individual that enables people to quickly become more professionally productive and interpersonally effective when working in an unfamiliar culture, or when working anywhere with others who are from an unfamiliar culture. As an interculturalist I study what happens when members of one cultural group interact with members of another in order to enable people to apply techniques that mean they can adapt more readily to an unfamiliar set of values, habits of thought, and patterns of behaviour.

Do you see an increasingly important role for people with your type of skills?

Oh yes. Business is becoming more global as our world becomes ever flatter. You have UK businesses outsourcing to India, India businesses exporting to UK. Organisations are working in different ways now because of the dramatic changes in technology and if you are going to trade, manage or operate successfully with overseas partners, employees, or distributors then you have to be able to empathise with other cultures.

When did you first realise you had an empathy with other people's cultures?

Well, I partly put it down to my upbringing, which was fairly unique. I was brought up in XXXXX in East Africa where I lived alongside African, Indian, Japanese, Chinese and British people. So I guess subconsciously I learnt to adapt my style and my language as I became engaged with other people from other cultures. It wasn't a conscious thing. Then when I came to the UK at a very early age I was only one of five Indian children amongst a school of 1000. You learn then that if you don't adapt you don't survive.

So learning to live alongside other cultures means you have to lose yours?

Absolutely not! It's very important to be aware of who you are and keep true to yourself. But there is absolutely no harm, indeed in today's world I would argue it is absolutely essential, to being open to other cultures and being aware of the subtle nuances. It makes perfect business sense.

Can you give me an example?

For example when an Indian shakes their head in a business meeting. To a European this may be interpreted as a "no". But it's not the case. It could just mean the other person is acknowledging what you are saying. Can you imagine the consequences of misunderstanding that gesture.

So an interculturalist will help me understand about etiquette and acting agreeably in polite company. "Give and receive business cards with both hands in Japan," for example?

Yes, it's true that I will help people understand the do-and-don't rules of conducting business. But do-and-don't rules represent the tiniest tip of what I do. I work very closely with my clients – both large and small enterprises – to help them learn and apply skills that lead quickly to successful adaptation and thereby to professional success and personal fulfilment in an unfamiliar culture *or* among others from an unfamiliar culture.

What do you think makes a good interculturalist?

It's difficult to put it into words but if you ask me it comes from experience. It's very difficult to teach it. For example you cannot just wake up one day and say you want to be an interculturalist. It's more than a career, it's an actual way of life because you are constantly learning. My background certainly helps immensely.

When did you first apply your skills?

As a young HR Manager we were engaged in a union dispute. Many of the staff did not speak English and, to be quite frank, the UK management did not understand them or their needs. I engaged with them on their level and in their mother tongue and we resolved the dispute. I did not know it at the time but I was acting like any good interculturalist should.

Later as HR Director for Asia-Pacific region for McGraw Hill I worked with many different cultures and different levels within each culture from the President all the way down to the cleaner. Now that's a real challenge because you have a diverse amount of stakeholders from different cultures and you learn to adapt your style and language to get the most out of people. At the end of the day as human beings we just want to be understood and treated as individuals. It's not a difficult concept to understand but it is not always easy for business to see how they can do it.

And that's where you come in?

(Laugh) Yes, that's where I come in. I am intensely passionate about getting under the skin of any business I work with, to understand the people and their actual needs and to deliver solutions that really make a difference. I know that many consultancies will say that but I really do mean it. Every situation is different and that's what I find really invigorating. I've been in at the deep end, I've had real hands on managerial experience and I'm intensely passionate about what I do.

Laxmi, thank you.

My pleasure.