
Becoming Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable

By Lothar Katz

Twenty years ago, after I had moved from Germany to the United States for the first time, it took me months until I finally stopped telling people how I was doing when they asked.

Think about this for a moment. Not an easy point to get, right?

When people said “*How are you?*,” my response may have been something like “*Well, unfortunately I didn’t sleep all that well last night. Not sure why, really. Maybe I have a cold coming.*” I’d ramble on, while my counterpart was probably looking at me thinking: “*Why in the world is he telling me all this?*”

The answer? “***Because you asked!***”

In the U.S., “*How are you?*” means nothing more than “*Hello.*” You are supposed to respond with something like “*Fine, and you?*,” which may in turn trigger a “*Great, thanks.*” Thereafter, you either both go your separate ways or start a ‘real’ conversation.

Contrast this with my native Germany or, for that matter, most other non-English speaking countries around the world: the local-language equivalent of “*How are you?*” is commonly an invitation to tell the inquirer how you presently feel. Not following this invitation tends to be considered rude. Responding with the equivalent of “*Fine, and you?*” could actually be interpreted as “*Go away—I don’t want to talk to you.*” Not an ideal way of making and keeping friends.

Mind you, I am no fool. I had known long before moving across the pond how the concept of “*How are you?*” worked in the U.S. Problem was, my brain and my feelings seemed unable to agree with each other over the right way to respond. Every time I said “*Fine, and you?*,” I felt like a jerk, like I was slapping the other in the face. My natural way of avoiding this feeling was to give the kind of responses I did. The instinct never fully waned, but I eventually realized it was a matter of respect to follow the local practice rather than insisting on my preference.

All of this taught me a lesson that stuck. It is a useful one for all cross-cultural interactions, whether you move to another country or just go there on a business trip: knowing about differences is not enough. You also have to be prepared to deal with these differences at an emotional level. It is crucial to ‘become comfortable with being uncomfortable.’

Make no mistake about how much you can change. I still cringe when at a Chinese banquet, the person next to me loudly slurps his or her soup, their way of saying that it tastes great. I still have an instinctive wish to back away when someone from Latin America stands much closer to me in a conversation than I like.

This is about more than mere differences in etiquette rules. I still feel under attack when an Israeli, a member of what is likely the most direct culture in the world, uses harsh words to critique a proposal I made. I still feel cheated when someone from Russia dishes up an obvious lie while negotiating, a tactic considered perfectly legitimate in that country. But no matter what the cross-cultural situation presents, I try hard not to let any of these emotions influence my behavior.

How do you go about learning to become comfortable with being uncomfortable? In my experience, it takes a fundamental decision, followed by extensive practice.

The decision is never to take things personally. Once you realize that the other's behavior is neither inconsiderate nor otherwise inappropriate in **their** views, that the only issue between you is that theirs and yours are different, it becomes far easier to keep your cool and not let any such behaviors influence your own ones.

Practice means seeking exposure to the kind of experiences I described. It helps to remind yourself that showing respect for local practices is always an investment worth making. Your feelings of discomfort won't go away, but you will eventually learn to find your balance and adapt to any situation.

Are you comfortable yet?

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