

What's at the centre of a map offers insight

Susan K. Matheson

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This page occasionally publishes "postcards" from alumni of Capilano College's McRae Institute of International Management, which for 20 years has offered graduate courses in doing business in, first, Asia and now also Latin America. The latest McRae alumni postcard is from Susan Matheson, a managing partner at The Image Builders, which, among other services, offers advice and training for people doing business across cultural divides.

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A map serves as a frame of reference, a starting point and a determiner of location and direction; it can provide comfort and stability. As I looked at the map on the wall in my office in Tokyo, however, I felt incredibly lost. Language, business practices and even earthquakes were all things for which I'd diligently prepared -- not being able to recognize home on a world map was a bit of a surprise.

As I took a moment to orient myself with the map, I could see that my whole world had in fact shifted. Like most Canadians, I was used to launching a map quest by seeking the familiar shape of Hudson's Bay to the West of the Atlantic Ocean which was reliably centred on our world map. The world map affixed to my office wall, common in Japan and Australia I would learn, placed the Pacific Ocean in the centre of the chart. If one imagined a globe, Canada shifted "far East" and resurfaced in the far West. Japan, Australia and the rest of Asia took on more prominence in this local edition and didn't suffer the humiliation of a severing down the middle.

That curious map in Tokyo and my initial encounter with it stuck in my mind as I travelled and participated in business elsewhere around the world.

Some years later I was living in Santiago, Chile, and was invited to present a lecture on cross-cultural awareness to the local chapter of the International Professional Women's Association. Scanning the room I recognized a few faces from the expat community. As I began my introduction to the topic of crossing cultures in business, it occurred to me that a perfect illustration of my most important point might just be there among the familiar faces. Acknowledging an element of risk, I invited five people (of whose ethnic origin I was certain) to the front of the room and asked each to draw a map of the world on the large white boards. Backs turned, the executives from Scotland, Hong Kong, Canada, Argentina, and Australia set to work. It didn't take long until the rest of the gathering started to laugh and chatter among themselves. They could see what the illustrators themselves had yet to notice; as I had suspected each one's map of the world was unique. Each had been socialized to see the world in an entirely different way.

These experiences have guided me in my work helping others to understand the importance of cultural intelligence in business. How can we presume to do business effectively if we don't give consideration to the fact that we all bring our own culture and view of the world to the boardroom table? Patience, cultural education, and mindfulness will lead to better understanding and greater levels of success.

As John Lennon wrote: "How can I go forward if I don't know which way I'm facing?"

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