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SPOTLIGHT ON THE NEW GLOBAL LEADER

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An interview with Andy Molinsky by Sarah Cliffe

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SPOTLIGHT

ARTWORK Shannon Rankin, *Artifacts (II)* (detail)
2015, map, acrylic, adhesive, paper, 30" x 44"



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ANDY MOLINSKY, the author of *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures Without Losing Yourself in the Process*, urges us to focus on the everyday means by which tasks get done all over the world. Drawing on his years of field research, teaching, and consulting, the Brandeis professor advises experimenting with ways of working that don't violate your sense of self but do adapt to new cultural norms. Here he talks with HBR's executive editor about the difficulties—and pleasures—of cross-cultural learning.

HBR: Your research looks at the “microprocesses” individuals use when they're learning to adapt to a new culture. Why did you choose that approach?

Molinsky: It started out as more of a personal interest than an academic one. After college I worked in a small consulting firm in Paris, and I loved to watch people from around the world figuring out the culture, trying to adapt to what was expected, blaming their faux pas on being foreign, and generally muddling through. I actually kept a diary of observations. At that point I'd never even heard of 'organizational behavior,' but eventually I did graduate work in OB and psychology to further explore those issues.

While I was in grad school, I also coached foreign professionals part-time. The challenge for them was how to behave in a new way when every bone in their bodies was telling them not to. The difficulty was more psychological and behavioral than it was cognitive. But what I quickly realized was that most academic literature—and even most cross-cultural coaching—fixates on differences: In Germany people do X. In China people do Y. Differences are important, but knowing something at an abstract level doesn't help you adapt. You have to practice new behaviors in actual situations: speaking up in a meeting or giving someone performance feedback. So my work has always combined theory and practice, and in both spheres I've focused more on how people learn to do these things effectively at a microlevel, under conditions of high anxiety, than on the differences between cultures.

There's so much rhetoric today about companies “going global”—but let's face it, companies don't go global, people do. It's people who are negotiating contracts, leading meetings, establishing relationships. And they need help, way down in the weeds where business gets done.

You've developed an approach—almost a methodology—for turning knowledge about cultural differences into better-adapted behaviors. Tell us about that. At a high level, it consists of three stages. The first step in a high-pressure situation that's outside your cultural comfort zone is to understand the code, the rules of the game. Here again, don't get lost in abstractions. I tell people to figure out what the cultural norms are and how they differ from the home culture on six dimensions: directness, enthusiasm, formality, assertiveness, self-promotion, and self-disclosure. Getting specific like this helps

to alleviate the generalized anxiety people tend to feel in a new setting.

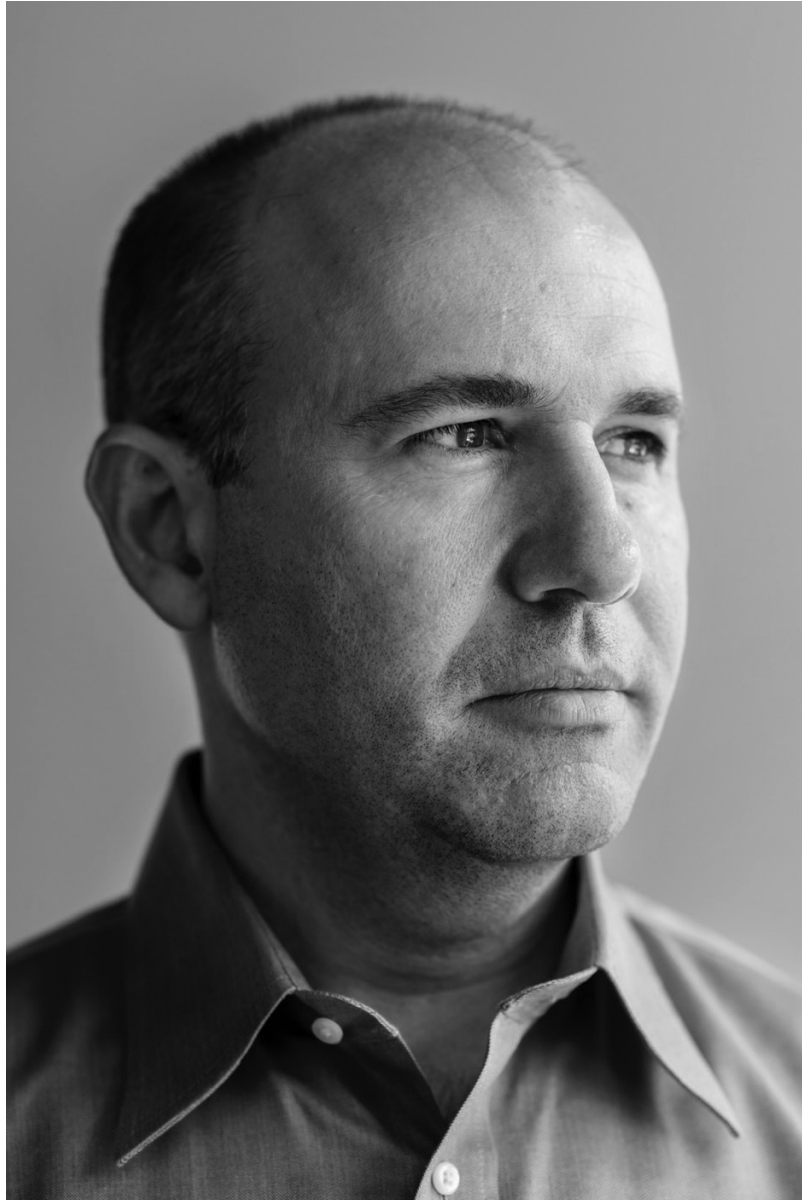
Second, figure out what the “zone of appropriateness” is in the new culture for each of those dimensions. We tend to exaggerate what’s required, by the way. In most cultures there’s a range of acceptable behaviors. The fact that Americans are typically more enthusiastic than Germans doesn’t mean that a German man working in the States needs to answer “Fantastic!” when his manager asks him how he’s doing. “Fine, thank you” will do.

At the same time, figure out what your comfort zone is on that particular dimension in a specific situation. Does giving criticism more directly (for example) make you feel sick to your stomach or just strange and uncomfortable? People’s answers vary greatly. The gap is about who you are as much as it is about your culture. If there’s a big gap between what’s considered appropriate and what you’re comfortable with, that’s the place to start. Will some tweaks to your normal behavior edge you into appropriateness? Do you need to practice various scenarios and see what feels right? Play with adaptations—rehearse them, see how people react to them, adjust them. Find out what works for you.

In the third stage, once you’ve figured out what adaptations you can (and are willing to) make, develop muscle memory. Make them automatic by practicing.

The middle step—tailoring your response to a particular situation—must be the toughest part. What are some concrete examples? Sometimes a really subtle change will do the trick. Here’s an example related to self-promotion. A Russian woman working in a U.S.-based consulting firm hated the expectation that she would compete and sell herself to get onto a good project. (In Russia she would simply have been assigned to a project.) One small word—“help”—turned out to be really useful. When the next important project was launched, she said to the team leader, “I think I could help you succeed because...” and then cited relevant experience she’d bring to it. She was promoting herself, but in a way that felt comfortable to her.

Sometimes you need to meet people halfway by blending cultural approaches. Here’s an example from my book: I wrote about an American manager who tried to empower Indian employees by asking for their opinions and drawing them into decision making. The employees concluded that he didn’t



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have his own ideas, or the smarts to make the decisions—in short, that he wasn't a competent leader. In the end, he required them to contribute ideas and then made the decisions on his own. By insisting that team members contribute ideas, he stuck to his original desire to help them grow professionally. But he ceded ground by being a more top-down manager, which was a better fit with Indian cultural norms.

What psychological barriers arise in the process?

Three issues come up regularly. First, people get anxious about whether they're being authentic. I hear "This is just not me" a lot. Many of them imagine someone from home judging them. Second, they feel incompetent. These are people who are used to succeeding and are at a certain level of status in their home country, but they don't make successful adaptations immediately. They feel not just incompetent but also that they're *seen* as incompetent. And third, they become resentful. We know in theory that we need to adapt to different cultural norms, but it's really hard, stressful work. And when you're stressed, you're generally at your least creative and productive. So you resent the whole situation.

But once people get over that hump, they often learn something interesting about themselves. Sometimes an aspect of a new culture is a better fit with your personality. That can be really exciting.

If you are relatively high in the organization but you're in a new culture, how do you know when you should adapt, when they should adapt, and when you should live with the differences?

I don't have any rules of thumb—but you want to pick your battles. If something in the new culture is getting in the way of competing successfully, then it makes sense to insist on some changes. If you're a tech company that needs to move fast to keep up, a casual attitude toward deadlines can be fatal. In that case, the culture needs to change and they need to adapt. But be sure to adjust your own behavior on less salient dimensions.

How useful is it to talk with others about difficulties and the adjustments you're trying to make? To develop shared language about cultural differences?

I've seen settings where a whole group learns to talk about subtle differences. Picture a Dutch manager working in Chicago. Back home he would never include a joke in a presentation. Now picture him saying, "I'm about to do something very un-Dutch"

as he puts up a relevant Dilbert cartoon. Such self-conscious commentary on culture can be really useful.

Even if the group doesn't develop a shared awareness around these issues, the individual needs to reflect on what's happening. Nobody changes without a certain level of self-knowledge, and for most of us that means finding language to describe the reality we see. Often it's helpful to bounce interpretations off someone else. To do that effectively, you need to build real relationships with people in the new setting.

And of course relationship building is important beyond just getting a reality check.

Relationships are huge. Once someone's gotten to know you pretty well, they're going to cut you some slack when you screw up, which you will. You'll cut yourself some slack too if you feel that you're known and trusted and that people wish you well. It's healthy to have a self-forgiveness policy, by the way—you're going to need it.

Are there companies with such strong norms that an Indian and a Korean and a Brit can seamlessly work together?

I'm not sure it's about a strong company culture when that happens. It's often more about how many locals versus cosmopolitans you have on staff. Places like McKinsey hire a lot of very cosmopolitan people—they come from the elites in their own countries, get trained at elite schools, get foreign assignments early. Those firms become breeding grounds: Even if someone walks in without a cosmopolitan perspective, he or she will develop it very quickly.

Speaking of cosmopolitans, do bicultural people adjust more quickly to a third cultural setting?

Absolutely. They've already learned how to code-switch—how to make an almost unconscious calculation about which set of behaviors to use depending on where they are. They don't have the deep, magnetic default that most people do.

Any last thoughts? Yes. I want people to know that this isn't rocket science. You don't need to have lived in five countries and learned five languages to be successful across borders. You do need to be thoughtful and self-aware, and you need to be willing to take that leap into the unknown. ♥

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