

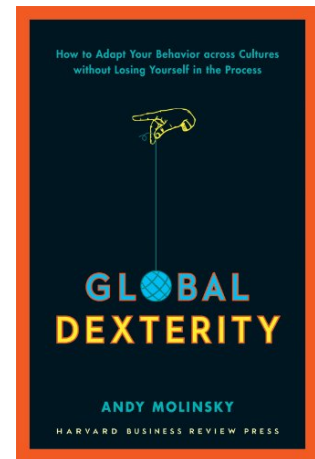
Molinsky, Andy, *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process*

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When it comes to cultural competence, there are some big gaps between knowing about, knowing how to, and actually developing and applying the skills to manage self in real situations. Andy Molinsky has provided us with a methodology for bridging into the third and most critical of these steps, and his choice of the word “dexterity” in the title of the book is well chosen to express the fact that we become effective when we have learned how to develop “muscle memory” to respond to real situations in intercultural management and in life, when on strange turf. It is about translating knowledge into behavior and acquiring the habits that make us good at it.



The insights Molinsky provides are not so much about how cultures differ, though the stories he tells make the reader fully aware of the dynamics of these differences. Certainly, one must know and recognize difference, but the book’s key insights are more about how we function wholistically in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. *Global Dexterity* is a workbook and the work is up to the user.

Molinsky helps us identify our own “culture code” and that of others, differences in what he calls prototypical thinking and behavior, which may belong to a people, to a place or a to situation, or to all three at a given moment. In other words, the “detective” work of sniffing out the rules for what is seen as appropriate behavior in a specific cultural setting. The now online *Cultural Detective*, though not explicitly mentioned, is a good tool for this work. Also, “Culture code” as used here, should not be limited to the Jungian approach for decoding cultural discourse developed by Clotilde Rapaille, for those familiar with it, though it is also a relevant form of investigation.

Since the variations in code can be almost infinite and therefore paralyzing when it comes to seeking out the right approach to a culture, Molinsky insists we not look for a single “right” behavior, but for a “zone of appropriateness”, a range within which to operate successfully in each culture. He then provides a practical navigational framework for looking into what is most likely to differ as we face situations in this zone. He asks us to pay attention to the relative measures of how *direct, enthusiastic, assertive, self-promoting* and *disclosing* our behaviors are in comparison with those of the other party. These measures are, admittedly, not exhaustive, but are likely to give us the solid return on our investment of the time used to understand and adapt our behavior.

Once aware of the culture code and the zones of appropriateness, the question is how can one stretch one’s comfort zone to overlap with the appropriateness zone of the other’s cultural code. Of course this can be a two way street, but in any case one must diagnose the situation, customize one’s behavior options to fit or bridge the gap, and, ultimately integrate the customized behavior to the point that it feels right and can become the “new normal” for the situations it fits.

The author identifies three psychological challenges along the way, and he provides a process for dealing with them. First, he uses the word *authenticity* to speak of the challenge raised by conflict with values and beliefs. Secondly comes *competence*—does one have the know-how and skill to

actually perform the new behavior? The final challenge is dealing with *resentment*—even if one can perform the behavior, will he or she feel embittered about having to do so?

The helpful metaphor in discussing these challenges is “acting”. An actor needs to learn a new role for a specific part of a drama. Here too mastering the role needs to be seen as a positive acquisition, the realization of a potential, rather than a loss of or suppression of self. Today’s language teachers realize this when they no longer speak of “accent reduction” but of “accent acquisition.” The search for “authenticity” (the *real* me) unfortunately is wed to US pop psychology. Objecting, “It’s just not me,” is often an obstacle or an excuse for avoiding the discomfort involved in widening one’s repertoire. Thus the theater metaphor is particularly useful here. In learning and practicing new skills, it is okay to say “No, it’s not me...*yet*...”

So how does one make adopting a new paradigm or behavior acceptable to the old self? Besides thinking of it as theater, one can enhance the recognition and acceptance of new behavior by calling on one’s own inner diversity to change one’s perceptions, viz., by aligning the new behavior with one’s goals, weaving it in with other personal or cultural values, or by working to understand and accept the other culture’s logic. If this automatically sounds like rationalistic deviation from what one holds as norms, it must be remembered that we regularly play one value against another in making changes and decisions, and that cultures themselves have both conflicting and complementary discourse to help us navigate life. The author again offers us process, “workbook” pages, for applying this alignment process.

None of this adaptation is likely to occur simply by knowing about differences, and it is here that Molinsky has most to offer to intercultural pedagogy and pedagogues. Few people can incorporate new and alien behaviors spontaneously. It takes practice, practice, practice, and it is this feature that is most neglected in current intercultural praxis. Gone are the days when a trainer had four or five days to offer participants enough hands-on exercises to try out and then integrate new behaviors in a process of familiarization, rehearsal and “dress rehearsal” or application to real situations. The reader will have to do this on his or her own, so the author provides pages, tools and questions to facilitate this. There is a potential here for online learning that should be pursued.

Inevitably we are awash in trial and error, in the challenge of experiential learning. So, Molinsky offers further help. There are tips on how to increase one’s chances of being forgiven one’s mistakes, how to look for a cultural model to pattern oneself after, or even how to find a mentor who understands you and your culture well enough to provide feedback, information and support.

What happens, however, when absolutes collide, when ethical standards will be violated if one adapts behavior and accepts practices that are beyond the pale? Here is where the “*without losing yourself in the process*” line of the book’s title most comes into play. Our creativity for building options is challenged. Humor, gentle insistence, and if the stakes are not too high, simply contradicting the local norm in your behavior may be necessary are given as examples.

Molinsky concludes the book and sums up its import with five key takeaways that compare conventional attitudes about cultural adaptation with the realities that become actionable using the insights, the paradigms and the processes he proposes.

The book is well written and an easy read. The challenge comes if one truly uses the tools it provides to put adaptation into practice. This is incumbent on intercultural professionals who need to model it for their clientele and students. We need to play with *Global Dexterity*’s excellent start and take it further, lest the old adage, “Those who can do, do; those who cannot do, teach!” be applied to preachers of cultural competence who fail to develop and practice “dexterity.”