

Ego Boundaries that Cross Borders

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Abstract:

As we jostle with each other for space, clean air and potable water on this planet we find that each nation, city, village and individual has a role to play in conserving the planet. In spite of the wider perspective that should ideally melt away man-made boundaries, these borders are reinforced as egos, both individual and collective, harden. An Inside-Out approach to inter-personal leading to international relations has been suggested in this paper beginning with a simple concept of Ego-Boundaries, Ego Balancing Traits and Emotional Competencies required by persons who intend to embark upon cross-cultural interaction. The role of neurological systems ranging from ‘mirror cells’ Amygdala, Orbito-Frontal Cortex and Pre-Frontal Cortex in use of key competencies are discussed and a whole-brain approach is recommended to liberate human potential in making the world a better place. The plane at which Emotional Competencies reside in the brain is spontaneously compassionate. The warm and friendly humane core is where intention and sincerity are clear regardless of any paraphernalia of ritual, costume or cultural conditioning. Operating from this level inside-out reaching out to others, be it within a family, state or across international borders, responsive interactions are bound to succeed.

EGO BOUNDARIES THAT CROSS BORDERS

Effectiveness in cross-cultural interactions and relationships require competencies and traits that lie in the realm of Emotional Competencies. Ego Awareness and Ego Balance will strengthen personalities with insight and understanding of invisible boundaries that become barriers to fruitful interaction and seem perplexing and hence frustrating to the uninitiated. Needless to say, what applies to interaction between two or more humans remains applicable even in cross-cultural settings and continues to exert influence in macro scale international relations. The challenge has to be tackled from inside-out. To simplify the apparently mysterious Ego we refer to M. Scott Peck’s model.

Ego Concept

Ego is to the personality as skin is to the body – an essential and vital organ. The skin defines an individual as distinct from the environment and shelters within it the vital processes of the internal milieu. The person occupies space and exerts a sense of presence. The skin is sensitive to external conditions and recoils with external onslaught. That this sensitivity is essential for survival becomes evident in leprosy afflicted persons who lose sensitivity and gradually the insensitive part is lost to repeated trauma and infection. So the ego envelope defines and protects the personality from inhospitable environments, opportunistic parasites and trauma while nurturing the abilities, individual talent and unique skill-set of the personality. Together the personality and its ego occupy space, exert a presence and even display territorial instincts. This presence adds social worth to the personality.

The shape and size of a person's ego ideally follows the contours of the bundle of attributes the wearer has accumulated. Out-sized and misshapen egos are frowned upon and are liable to injury. Most others take it upon themselves to cut such over-sized egos to size and come armed with pins and barbs to puncture neighboring bloated personalities. However, skin can never be under-sized whereas an ego can. When the ego is too small, the person lacks confidence, is unaware of his power and cannot be effective.

Center of Humility – Ego Balance

Ego-fit is in a continuous and dynamic state of flux - the resultant of two opposing forces, the pleasure seeking enlarging hunger for esteem and the internalized critical system often called the 'Pig Parent' that constantly jeers and belittles a person with deprecatory self-talk. If the see-saw balances out and becomes stable it will have to be perfectly balanced at the 'Center of Humility' that completely matches the real abilities with the personal perception of self. Other stable but inappropriate states lie at either extreme of the see-saw board – 'Over-confident' and 'Under-confident'. The extremes are stable states because the individual does not have to expend energy to remain in that state. He

becomes complacent and remains that way. He does not grow and can be labeled as 'dead-wood'. However, in order to remain stable at 'Humility Point' a person has to be alert and dynamic like a tight-rope walker, hence he is alert, attentive, developing with experience or exercising self-awareness and growing as he pushes himself towards his aspirations

The shift from 'Dead-wood' to 'Dynamic' involves overcoming inertia of complacency that demands stepping on the 'Energy' pedal. One has to step out into reality, seek true feed-back, accept it and work on it. This action will involve overcoming fear associated with the pain of squashing the ego in case of the over-confident and the fear of realization of the extent of one's own power with its collateral of taking on extra responsibility in the case of the hitherto under-confident person. Hence the move from dead-wood to dynamic demands personal discipline that is self-directed. Externally imposed discipline can be effected only by a committed and persevering mentor.

The process of adjusting the ego-fit is an exercise of Emotional Intelligence. It involves Perceptual Acuity, Self-Awareness, Flexibility, Resilience and Tolerance of Novelty along with the ability to regulate the joy and elation of enlarging ego and the hurt and pain of having to squeeze it to lesser proportions. Emotional Intelligence is called into play to effectively manage fears, put them aside to find the courage to face feed-back and accept the real world. Thus persons with high levels of Emotional Intelligence can sport egos of appropriate size and shape.

Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

The correlation between an appropriate ego-fit and Emotional Intelligence can be juxtaposed on the correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Cross-Cultural Adaptability as researched by Kelley and Meyers. The results of their study show that the requirements for Cross Cultural Effectiveness are:

Stress Tolerance of a high order

'Low Neuroticism'

Extroversion

Need for Interpersonal Attachments

Stress Tolerance

Stress Tolerance is a term that signifies a positive stance. The individual who can prevent stress at the point of its generation and perceive pressure as a challenge that is stimulating rather than stressful, is able to protect the thinking brain from debilitating effects of stress. This results in a physiological fitness that is reflected by the regulation of levels of cortisol secreted by the adrenal cortex to levels that are energizing but not toxic. Stress tolerance is associated with stress perception; a point where mind and body meet and debate on whether one will cope or succumb. Stress tolerance and coping is not entirely an internal attribute as it can be bolstered by faith on the support system and by the presence of dependable fall-back options. (Interdependence has a physiological fall-out.)

Low Neuroticism

Neuroticism is based on the amount of personal responsibility one takes for external situations. If someone is wont to take undue responsibility and experience guilt for situations he is not really responsible for he will be overwhelmed into inaction. The other end of the spectrum of guilt is one who takes no responsibility at all. Such a person is unreliable and cannot be effective because he is not likely to take corrective action being (self-perceived as) completely innocent. Thus a balanced position – one of taking responsibility for things one is really responsible for and not feeling guilt for factors outside one's circle of influence, would characterize a person who would qualify for the task of cross cultural effectiveness.

Extroversion

I agree with Kelley and Meyers that having an extroverted disposition is conducive to Cross Cultural Effectiveness, though I would like to caution that all extroverts may not develop the habit of introspection. Persons low on introspection may not have adequate Self-Awareness, which is an indisputable prerequisite for Emotional Intelligence. Without sufficient self awareness and social awareness there will be flaws in Self-

Presentation, which is an important aspect of the way one conducts one-self in new cultural settings in order to gain acceptance at primary levels of interaction.

Need for Interpersonal Attachment

The primordial urge to belong and feel accepted, drives humans to bond and forge relationships. The need may be evolutionary in origin as individuals would not have been able to survive without the group in the inhospitable wilderness. In civilization this urge has not diminished but it still drives us because mere survival is not enough – one must get a life. Interpersonal attachment has to be taken further than family and work-place for fulfillment of numerous facets of personality and its various talents. This need like any other basic need has to be acknowledged and fulfilled before an individual can get on with a task, and the task in consideration presently is being cross-culturally effective by reaching out beyond national borders. A person who is content to restrict interpersonal attachments to the inner circle will be aloof and discouraging of friendly overtures and signals and perceived as stand-offish.

Empathy and Resonance

The remarkable discovery of Mirror Cells has demystified empathy. Our built-in interpersonal radar systems are intricately linked with neurons powering many intelligent processes. Sensing inputs from non-verbal communication may happen at lower levels but interpretation must happen in the conscious realm if the inputs are to be viewed in cross-cultural context. Patience is required to pull the processing up to the cerebral cortex and make interactions ‘mindful’. Social Intelligence involves not a localized portion of the brain but many levels ranging from sub-conscious to analytical. If intelligent people take it upon themselves to exercise empathy, they can hone perceptual acuity and attune interpersonally with constructive intent, they can be very effective. Intelligent persons often lack humility, hence are unaware of gaps in their perceptual acuity, and feel perplexed when they fail to resonate.

Flexibility and Openness

The virtue of Flexibility and Openness is the key to the next level. If someone wears a thick and rigid ego and finds ambiguity and novelty unacceptable, unexpected inputs from the interpersonal radar will cause great discomfort and confusion. To identify such rigidity look for symptoms such as the habit of stereotyping or classifying of people and speedy delivery of verdict about character displaying a judgmental attitude.

Whole Brained

Preference for order, structure and sharp demarcation is a characteristic of left-brained persons. It is difficult for such persons to accept that a problem has no solution. They may want to throw themselves at any incongruity and try to iron it out to merge with familiar terrain. Adjusting to completely different and perhaps as rigid cultures will be impossible without the opening up of the mind to embrace the fuzziness that is quite acceptable to the right brain. Hence a 'whole-brained' approach involving left and right hemispheres as well as the whole limbic component of the mid-brain with its emotional equipment is recommended for individuals who are about to embark upon cross-cultural interaction.

Curiosity

Curiosity about new things is innate. In evolutionary context this intrinsic attribute could serve to provide vigilance against new threats within familiar surroundings. Sighting of unfamiliar behavior often generates fear or anxiety. If understood, this threat perception can quickly be put aside and the new object / ritual / behavior can be examined for what it is worth. Curiosity drives exploration enlarging the scope of opportunity and understanding. Curiosity is one of the balancing traits for ego as described by Marcum and Smith. While Humility reminds us that we do not know everything, Curiosity provides the courage to explore, test and innovate. Healthy curiosity helps us find a balance between rigid structures of the familiar and the chaos and confusion of the unknown. It brings us closer to reality and contributes to the correctness of the ego-size by putting the individual in right perspective.

Security

Psychological health and physical health contribute to personality and state of the ego. Insecurity perceived by mind or body contribute through the physiology of anxiety to intolerance of both ambiguity and novelty. Though curiosity can be expected to lead to delight of discovery, acceptance and learning, in the presence of insecurity, curiosity takes on an unhealthy hyper-vigilant stance, hardening the ego into fortress-like dimensions walling up the desire to continue learning.

On the other hand, a strongly grounded personality, sure of his identity and comfortable within him-self, will also be comfortable in unfamiliar settings. The constructive intention behind the interaction and non-verbal declaration of interdependence will shine through and be picked up by the other person's radar for sincerity powered by mirror neurons. It is important to be sensitive to the impression made on others by continuing use of empathy circuitry throughout the interaction and its follow through.

Training

Preparation for cross-cultural interaction will have to include study of the new culture likely to be encountered. If it is not possible to prepare ahead, one must allow time for observation and understanding before embarking on business. Communicating with people from different backgrounds is a challenge. Language is perhaps the least of the challenges. Importance needs to be given so sufficient attention is paid to :

- The significance of rituals
- Personal space requirements
- Punctuality requirements
- The meaning of gestures
- Respect for alien cultures
- Acceptance of equity of all humans

Apart from a few gestures that mean different things to different cultures, body language and the smile are universal on this planet. One cannot afford to be impatient during cross-

cultural interactions. Authentic presence and active listening (even in presence of an interpreter, we should be listening to and making eye-contact with the primary speaker) are reassuring because the other person feels he is being taken seriously.

Attentiveness

Humans are hard-wired with a preference for the happy face (happy-face advantage) and fearful expressions can hijack attention because the amygdala detects fear within a fraction of a second and steers attention to detect the cause of fear. Worry distresses the amygdala and it floods the pre-frontal cortex with distracting signals and prevents attentiveness and attunement. Persons with high Emotional Quotient can very quickly turn around negative emotions, not as actors and mimics control their facial muscles but from the basic level of emotional change that is reflected effortlessly by the facial muscles. Emotionally Intelligent people are adept at dealing with fear, anger and worry. With positive thinking, they can calm down the amygdala, enabling attentiveness.

If full attention is given to the interaction, it becomes a mindful activity that is akin to meditation, therefore beneficial to the individual through the release of fulfilling neuro-peptides like endorphins. If the meeting is successful additional dopamine release is likely. Coupled with the learning that comes from exposure to new cultures and people, the positive experience is an elevating one enhancing personal growth and maturity.

Interdependence

Reaching out across national boundaries is an activity between individuals but with immense ripple effect, enveloping the planet. The quality of each interaction is of essence to the global emotional climate. Realization of interdependence can align nations to reach for common goals like peace, joy and prosperity through interactions that are between individuals but have consequences on whole nations. Failure to resonate as individuals could fuel suspicion, hatred and animosity with snowballing effect. The future of the planet depends on each nation and none can be excluded from the table.

Through the power of Emotional Intelligence we have become aware of the role of Ego in forging and maintaining relationships. Exercising Self-Awareness and Cross Cultural Awareness we can communicate across borders with simplicity and sincerity. Emotional Intelligence is actively at work even if people are not familiar with the term or are even illiterate. They can intuitively sense sincerity and intent without words being spoken. Basic respect for creatures including humans is what becomes apparent in any interaction sooner or later. We may be supercilious about IQ, training and experience but we can never underestimate the power of Emotional Intelligence of others.

Neurological Plane

Emotions reside in the part of the brain that is intrinsic and spontaneously compassionate. This level of the brain cannot lie and cannot pretend. It can effectively sense lies and pretense in others. It is this level that is universal to all cultures. The warm and friendly humane core is where we could all be operating from and reaching out to touch the core in others. On this plane meaning and intention are clear regardless of any paraphernalia of ritual, costume or tradition. Persons trained to be emotionally competent ‘respond’ rather than ‘react’ and are firmly in touch with reality and truth.

Equipoise

Developing the trait of the habitual pursuit of Truth, uncovering of the whole truth and action upon the discovered truth is to gain Veracity. This is the third ego-balancing trait enumerated by Marcum and Smith in their book ‘Egonomics’, Humility and Curiosity being the other two. Humility opens minds and adds tranquility to a personality. Curiosity contributes interest and the motivation to continue learning throughout life. Veracity brings clarity by embracing both the desirable and inconvenient truth. The three point balance that these traits bring to the personality results in ‘equipoise’ that becomes apparent as grace. Wobbly egos are unbecoming and take us on a rough ride.

Resilience

Having balanced the ego we may still find troubled waters swirling about us and our boat being rocked by external circumstances. We need to be equipped with a robust life-boat

to be confident of riding the waves. Biologically the development of the Orbito-Frontal Cortex (OFC) would be that lifeboat. The OFC is a strap of neural tissue that connects the emotional brain with the Pre-Frontal Cortex where appropriateness is analyzed, characterized by an abundance of plump Von Economo Neurons (VEN or Spindle Cells). The OFC is the calming influence on the emotional center. It makes emotion see reason provided it is given the time to become aware of the emotion. The VEN give the OFC super speed within the relatively slow grey matter. Signs that point to a robust OFC are the ability to:

- Regulate response appropriately
- Delay Gratification
- Make Balanced Decisions
- Be Adaptable
- Conduct good Interpersonal Interaction
- Turn around negative moods
- Habitually harbor positive emotions and Optimism

Development of the OFC depends on experiential learning from multi-sensory inputs from the age of two and continues well into adulthood. It is enhanced by secure environments, loving nurture from caregivers who can attune effectively.

Power of Relationship

The brain has the propensity to communicate wirelessly with other brains and form relationships that link biological systems so closely that two or more people can form a psycho-biological unit and affect each other's well being. Such is the power of social bonding that it can encircle the Earth. It is time to recognize the potential of well regulated, perceptive and resilient emotional beings, equip them with awareness about Emotional Intelligence and allow them to lead the world towards a future where everyone wins.

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