

g. Coping with Less Familiar Thought Processes

(1) Problems Life in the United States is made up of "problems" for which "solutions" can be found. It's implied that every problem has its solution. Also, that every situation has a "problem" or "no problem" status.



A situation in the Arab World is either satisfactory (i.e., there is no highly unique emergency) or it is unsatisfactory. God, Allah, has predetermined the outcome of all things. Thereby, attempting to solve or change a situation is futile.

The term "problem" applies to math or engineering contexts and its American uses are confusing when no "problem" is perceived by others.

American: "Your plan looks good. I don't see any problems there..."

Arab: "Problems?"

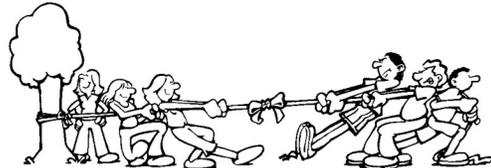
American: "We would be glad to take care of this problem for you."

Arab: "There is no problem that I see."

American: "The biggest problem seems to be..."

Arab: "Problem?"

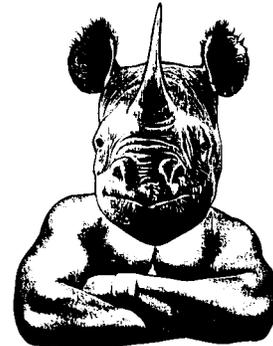
(2) Competition and Comparison Americans tend to assume that others understand competition and that it motivates them also.



In the Arab World, competition is not learned as a reason for doing something nor as a logical kind of motivation.

American: "We post grades weekly and find it useful in getting the students to do well."
Arab: "Why is posting grades useful?" (Sometimes it's seen as publicizing faults or publicly criticizing.)
American: "We'll test the students and then select from those with high scores.."
Arab: "Why should a student do well on a test if he isn't selected? Once he is, he must do well. But before?"
American: "If we did that, we will have more people at the demonstration than the Army did at theirs."
Arab: "What does it matter what the Army did?"
American: "When the other villagers see what this one does..."
Arab: "Why should it matter to them?"
American: "This wing is falling behind the others in its projects..."
Arab: "The other wings have their projects, we have ours."

Americans judge things and ideas by comparing them. It is a concept partly tied to competition. Many Arabs see what someone else is doing as irrelevant. The comparison the American assumes is meaningful, is meaningless to a large percentage of Arabs.



American: "Some of the courses here are similar to what we have in Texas."
Arab: "Oh?" (or "And?")
American: "The work isn't going as fast here as it has in some places where we've done this job."
Arab: "The work is slow?"
American: "I'm happy to be here. It's nicer than my last assignment."
Arab: "Oh. You like it here, yes."
American: "It will be one of the better airfields in your country—not as good as the one in the next province, but better than most."
Arab: "But it will be good?"
American: "By plane we made the trip a lot faster than we could by car."

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Arab: "Ah, you say the trip was fast?"

(3) Decision Making Process

Americans tend to believe that collective wisdom is superior to one person's wisdom. People should have a voice. The American concept is unintelligible to many Arabs. Leaders and elders have wisdom. What an American may see as disagreement, may be failure to understand.



American: "We shall have to find out what the trainees want in recreational facilities..."

Arab: "They will be happy with what they get."

American: "We'll talk with the village leaders and people about which program they want and need..."

Arab: "It is a big program, yes." (Let the alien concept go by, for why would one ask the people. The government just tells them.)

American: "The project should be explained to the people."

Arab: "Why? The elders will know what is in the plan when the project begins. How can anyone know what is needed until they see the plan the leaders have decided upon?"



Americans usually weigh the consequences of different courses of action, then select the one that seems "best."

Many Arabs tend to decide by what is traditionally proper, by obligations to friends or kinfolk, by fitting decisions to theory, or grouping like things. As a result, several choices may seem equal.

American: "I'll have to get more information to decide the pros and cons of each choice. Then we can decide which way is best."

Arab: "Do we need this data, as you say? Let us do now what is the proper way to do this."

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American: "I'm trying to decide if we should teach emergency first aid or a navigation course first."
Arab: "You say you are a navigator? Then navigation is what you should teach."
American: "We need the data I've listed to make a decision."
Arab: "You need all this information to decide?"
American: "If we use the briefing room when the general visits, more people can hear him. But the conference room is more luxurious and private. What do you prefer?"
Arab: "As a general, he will, of course, use the conference room."



Americans rank choices. Believing that there is usually a best way to do something, which can be found, then done. Ways differ in "how good" they are. "Objective" evaluation finds the "better" way (there being no equal way), and once the best is found, a belief that it can actually be implemented.

Most Arabs believe that several ways can be equally good. Arabs don't assume that objective evaluation decides. Also, just because a method is chosen, does not always mean it can be done. Ways of doing often are perceived as "proper" and "improper" with more than one of each kind.

American: "Is there any other way this can be done?"
(Seeking options)
Arab: "Other way? You do not like this way?"
American: "Which is the best procedure?"
Arab: "Best? Oh, who knows this?"
American: "Can you help me find the best way for the squadron to do it?"
Arab: "The squadron should have good plans."
American: "I have three plans I've drafted. Which do you think might be best?"
Arab: "Other people have good plans, yes. We will have our plan. It will be good also, yes."
American: "Which day would you prefer?"
Arab: "Any day will be good. Monday, Tuesday, any day."

American: "I'll prepare several recommendations and you can choose one."

Arab: "Yes, yes. But you will recommend one."

(4) Practical vs. Aesthetic

Qualities Americans value the practical or "useful" parts of an experience or event over the aesthetic, both in ideas and things, while Arabs value the aesthetic equally, sometimes more than, the usefulness of an idea or thing.



American: "Our library has a good film file, many books, and there are classes. Have you seen it?"

Arab: "It is a beautiful building. Very pleasant."

American: "If we cut down some of the trees, we can put the runway straight through. Do it fast."

Arab: "You say cut down trees? These are old trees."

American: "It would be more practical to put the building..."

Arab: "That would look nice."



In America, we teach our children to observe parts and to compare those parts from one thing to another. For instance, on an intelligence test, the child who matches the table to the chair is rated higher (which rewards analytical thinking). This kind of thinking seems crucial to technology.

Many Arab children, however, who match the second chair to the first, are down-graded in our system for not noticing that the first chair and the table are each missing a leg. There is no fairness in this test, it simply shows what kind of thinking is happening for matching two chairs as belonging together is not wrong...but neither is it analytical.

Experience with training programs involving Arab students learning to fly tends to support the belief that Arab thinking, before detailed exposure and learning of technology, is not analytical.

Students learning to fly the most basic trainer and then transferring to the next step up in trainer aircraft do not tend to transfer their knowledge. The first plane is learned as a whole unit. Instructors who assume they are applying the learning to the new aircraft have found this does not happen and therefore review all the basic points again before proceeding.



We assume that once you learn the basic function or rules regarding an aircraft wing, it will generally apply to all aircraft. This is a learned transfer and simply must be taught when foreign students are unaware of it.

Also, regardless of the project, you will be working with people using a second or third language, which automatically slows the pace. An Arabs visual patterns are right to left, the opposite of ours. Arabs are also generally a people who have not grown up with technical skills from childhood, despite a natural aptitude for these skills. All of this will probably quintuple the time factor.

h. Instructors and Teaching Lest an instructor or teacher be thought too proud, too much above oneself, we have a humble reply, "I don't know but I'll find out."

Many Arabs will misinterpret this reply to the point that the student or trainee or requestor will no longer grant you status. This may be tied to looking at the whole rather than the part. Either you are an expert--or you are not.



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What do we do then? If you do not know something you do not publicly admit it, but rather say something like, "I'll show you where to get that information." "I have a meeting shortly, will you return this afternoon." Whether or not the person guesses you do not know, the important point is to keep up appearances if you are to continue to be effective in the Arab system. Avoid applying our rules to their way of life and losing out. Experts know everything, not slices.

Our answer to the question, "Do you understand?," stresses accuracy; if we do not understand, we say so. In the Arab world, naturally, "appearances" have more priority than accuracy, so the answer, should you ask the question, will always be, "yes." Sometimes when an Arab becomes used to our ways in this country, he may say he does not, but normally it is rude to say so.



To admit not understanding carries two implications: first, you did not explain properly, which puts you down in public; and second, that he is not competent which hurts his appearances.

We have no hesitation in saying a flat "no" to someone when they ask us if we can do something and there is a definite rule saying we cannot.



In much of the Arab world a flat "no" is a signal you wish to end the relationship. The Arab way of saying "no" is to say, "I'll see what I can do," (no matter how impossible the task may be). After several queries, if the answer is still "I'm checking," or the like, it means...no. But it also means I am still your friend, I tried.

Americans tend to value on-the-spot learning over other ways while most Arabs tend to value learning from books,

meditation, and study as equal or above simply having seen things.

American: "We can have one of our men who's been to Vietnam lecture your cadets."
Arab: "Yes. We would like to hear someone with a good knowledge of the war." (Meaning more than just having been there.)
American: "He can talk with the students about his ideas. They'll hear for themselves how..."
Arab: "The students, of course, can study the ideas."
American: "We'll visit each base and see what is needed."
Arab: "We have good reports."
American: "We'll show the trainees so they can see for themselves..."
Arab: "Tell them what will happen. It is enough."
American: "I've read about your country, but now that I'm here, I can see for myself." (Implies reading has a lower value than seeing.)
Arab: "You have studied our country a great deal, yes."



i. Gifts and Bonuses

When invited to a Saudi social function, the guest is not expected to bring any gift. Indeed, he should not, for that might detract from the host's efforts to enhance his own dignity through generosity. In cases where the attaché has been asked to procure something, he should deliver it in relative privacy, likewise for an unsolicited gift. It would be best to give something of practical use or amusement.

Traditionally, the government pays bonuses at Ramadan, and it would be appropriate to present some monetary gift to Muslim household employees at this time of year. (Sometimes, a bonus of one month's salary is divided and paid at each of the two major holidays). The payment of bonuses correlates with the payment of annual poor tax, which is obligatory for Muslims.

Much of the Arab World is notorious for the custom of bakhshish--the offering and taking of "bribes" in business transactions. This practice, which in its largest dimension involves multi-million dollar governmental contracts, is more subtle in Saudi Arabia than in other Arab countries.

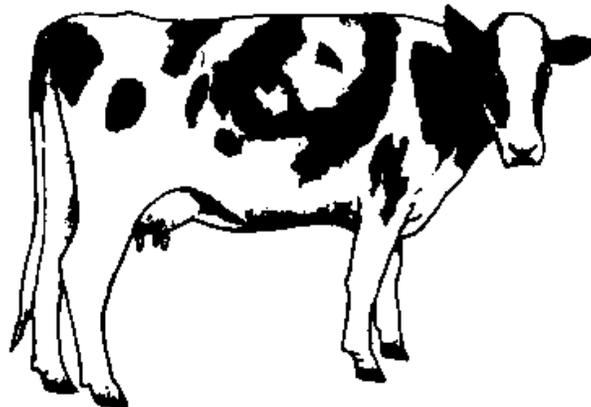


Nonetheless, it does exist there-- even at very high levels within the government. The attaché, although he is normally not concerned with contracting, will very likely become aware of the custom of bakhshish.

j. Importance of Amicability Once a request is submitted, there is usually nothing to be gained from official follow-up calls.

Saudis in general are more impressed by your treatment of them than by your status or position. Politeness (by Saudi standards) will likely lead to success. If a Saudi likes you, he is more inclined to act on your request.

An attaché, even a very amicable one, cannot possibly make friends with everyone in the various offices where he has business. However, he should attempt to establish good rapport with at least one person in each--ideally, the director. If not him, then a subordinate supervisor, action officer, or even a clerk. Sometimes, the lower ranking personnel are more reliable than their overseers. In any case, the attaché should not overlook such potentially valuable contacts.



"Get it right the first time."

Review Quiz: Work and Training Guidelines

True/False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.

1. _____ Most Arabs believe that several different ways to do something may be equally as good.
2. _____ For many Arabs, when a plan or proposal is well-stated, it is "perfect," regardless of whether it can be completed or is even possible.
3. _____ For most Arabs, the person is much more important than the mission or task.
4. _____ A compulsory eight hour work day is the norm for most Saudi Arabian officials.
5. _____ Many Arabs make decisions by carefully weighing different courses of action, then selecting what is "best."
6. _____ For some Saudi officials, the payment of bonuses equates with the payment of an annual poor tax.
7. _____ "Bakhshish" refers to the Arabic custom of friends tapping each other on the back to show affection.
8. _____ Often in the Arab world a flat "no" is a signal to end a relationship.
9. _____ A traditional response by an Arab instructor is "I don't know but I'll find out."
10. _____ Most Saudi Arabians are more impressed by your status and position than by your treatment of them.



"Combat is the most traumatic human event. It strips away an individual's veneer, exposing their true character. If a character flaw exists--it will appear in combat--guaranteed...Success in combat--and in life--has always demanded a depth of character. Those who can reach deep inside themselves--and draw upon an inner strength, fortified by strong values, always carry the day against those of lesser character."
General Charles C. Krulak