

A Sense of Perspective

By Kunio Yanagida

Some years ago, they were doing some construction work at the elementary school that my son went to. Because there were a lot of children around, the construction company had built a high fence around the site for safety's sake. Yet this fence was a constant source of frustration for the children, since it blocked their view of the construction work.

One morning, the children arrived to find three peepholes cut into the obstructing fence. Cut at different heights, the three holes were labeled, from top down, "Adults," "Kids" and "Dogs." The children were thrilled, eagerly taking turns at the peephole marked "Kids." Very soon they were climbing on each other's shoulders to try out the view from the topmost "Adults" peephole. "How's it look from up there?" "Wow! There's a guy working way over on the other side," reported the privileged child looking through the high opening. Other children scrunched down to peek through the lowest peephole, the one for dogs. The view through this peephole, however, was not very satisfying, being partially cut off by a pile of construction material. The children quickly learned that the different peepholes, even though there was only about a meter's difference between them, offered very different perspectives.

Yet this is a lesson we are likely to forget as we get older. We all tend to assume that everybody shares our own perspective, a dangerous assumption when we become convinced that we're right and are irritated that other people don't see things our way. Most of us, for example, never stop to consider how the world might look from a wheelchair. When a civic group trying to make more people aware of the problems the handicapped face recently offered Tokyo shoppers the opportunity to try out a wheelchair, most of those who made the attempt spoke of their fear that they would run into someone in the congested shopping area. The

slightest change in eye level can drastically affect our perception of the world.

Who discovered Columbus?

Perspective changes with more than just the height of our eyes. Experience and predispositions influence not only how you interpret what you see but even what you see. A doctor friend of mine was once in Lima, Peru to attend an international medical conference and, having some free time, he went to visit the Museo Amano owned by Yoshitaro Amano, eccentric entrepreneur and avid collector of Incaic artifacts. Amano gave my friend the full guided tour through the museum, treating him all the while to a running commentary on South American history. "In Japanese schools they teach that Columbus discovered America, and a lot of Japanese assume that there were no people on the American continents before then. But that's a historical fallacy promoted by the West, and the Japanese have swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Look at these artifacts. People were living here thousands of years ago. There was an ancient and wonderful civilization here. How dare they talk about Columbus 'discovering' the Americas!"

Soon after hearing this story, I read a satirical piece by the American columnist Art Buchwald called "Who Discovered Columbus?" in his *Down the Seine and Up the Potomac*. In it, a heated debate among the Indian tribes as to who exactly had discovered Columbus is settled once and for all by a chief who produces the text of a conversation between his ancestor and Columbus, a most unlikely but amusing twist. By turning history around and changing our perspective, Buchwald forces us to recognize our own blind spots and biases.

In the same vein, it makes no sense to

say that David Livingstone "discovered" Victoria Falls in Africa. There must have been native Africans living in the region and enjoying these spectacular falls long before Livingstone chanced upon them.

A composite perspective

If we want to find out the truth about something, we need to adopt many different perspectives, looking at it frontwards, backwards, sideways and inside out. Only then can we acquire what I would call a composite perspective. Especially when it comes to international issues, we must not allow our own cultural biases and assumptions to obscure our view and cloud our understanding of the other side's position.

The recent move among Japanese companies to establish overseas production centers is helping to alleviate trade friction and boost employment in the host countries. And in the process, it is also stimulating Japanese businessmen to acquire a more composite perspective.

Take, for example, the experience of one Japanese company that installed the same kind of assembly line system that it was using in Japan at its American plant. So far so good. The problem came when the company tried to schedule the work the same way in the United States as it did in Japan. This company's Japanese plants were run on a two-shift system, the day shift working from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and the evening shift from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. To ensure that the inconvenience was evenly distributed, these shifts were alternated weekly. When the same arrangements were introduced at the American plant, however, they ran up against strong opposition. The American workers complained that it was disruptive having to alternate shifts every week and that they wanted to stay on the same shift—either day or evening, it didn't really matter which—so they could



schedule their spare time better. As a result, the Japanese company changed its system for the American plant, dividing its workers into two permanent day and night shifts.

This is just one instance of how a Japanese company learned that the way it does things in Japan does not necessarily work in other countries. Through such trial and error, Japanese companies are gradually learning to adopt a more flexible world view.

In trying to understand other peoples, we often resort to citing well-known proverbs as indicative of their thinking. But this is a dangerous pitfall, since every proverb has its opposite and people cannot be characterized with such pat simplifications.

For example, there is a saying in Japanese that "the traveler knows no shame." Even the most upright citizen may feel at liberty to do things on a trip that he would be ashamed to be seen doing at

home, simply because he is a nameless face in the crowd among strangers. An observer from another culture might easily assume from this proverb that all Japanese are like transient tourists. Yet there is also the opposite: "A bird taking wing from a stream leaves the water clean." This is the old virtue of leaving a place at least as nice as you found it, even if you never plan to be back, and it hardly jibes with the idea of shamelessly leaving your morals at the train station.

Two sides to a coin

It is not easy for people from different cultures to understand each other. The best we can do is to stay in close communication, always prepared to be surprised at the customs and mores of others.

Even within a single corporate culture, there are frequent clashes between product development and sales people, between managers and their subordinates, more often than not caused by both sides' inability to understand the other person's position. Many companies have sought to counter this by adopting the psychotherapy technique of role playing, having product development people pretend to be sales people and vice versa. Forced into each other's shoes, the former antagonists are likely to work together better since they will have acquired new perspectives.

Logically, it should also be possible to adapt this kind of role playing for corporate executives who need to acquire a better understanding of the foreign country they have been posted to. In acting the role of a person from another country, you quickly realize how little you actually know about the other's customs, lifestyles and mindset. Realizing how little you know about the other person's perspective is the first step away from unsubstantiated biases and toward improved mutual understanding. ●

(This is the fifth of six parts.)