



# THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Stephen Shaw

"..certain things are done differently in different countries.."

Generalisations about national characteristics are usually to be deprecated. Characterisation of an entire nation on the basis of some (often poorly researched) preconceptions, gives rise to prejudices, and is often inaccurate in any event.

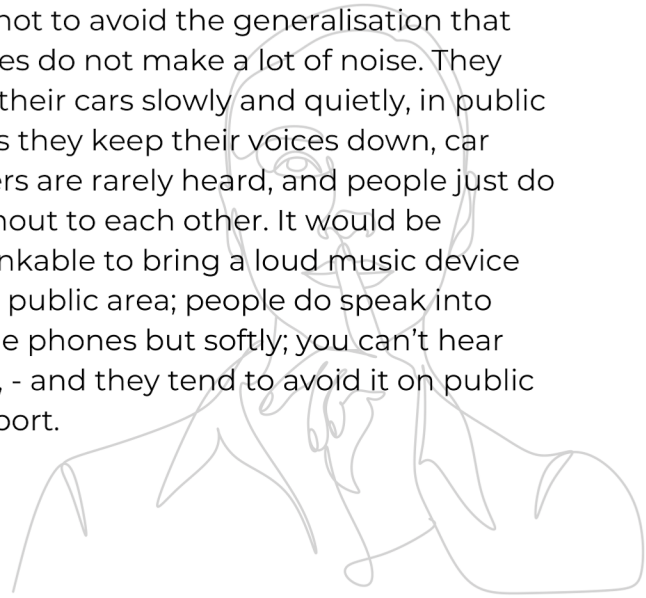
Scotsmen are not constitutionally mean. American tourists do not generally wear check golf trousers with a dodgy straw hat. The French do not pong of garlic and walk around in stripey maritime T shirts, playing accordions.



But it plainly is the case that certain things are done differently in different countries. Take conflict management, for example.

I just returned from a summer break in Sweden. If you haven't been, you must go. Stockholm and other cities are beautiful, and the Swedish countryside, never far from the sea, is idyllic.

What struck me most though, was the quiet of the place, both in town and country. It is hard not to avoid the generalisation that Swedes do not make a lot of noise. They drive their cars slowly and quietly, in public places they keep their voices down, car hooters are rarely heard, and people just do not shout to each other. It would be unthinkable to bring a loud music device into a public area; people do speak into mobile phones but softly; you can't hear them, - and they tend to avoid it on public transport.



I found myself speculating about what happens when Swedes have an argument – which obviously they do. I saw a man arguing about a parking ticket he'd been given. It was more in the nature of an exchange of ideas, and no doubt ended the way these things usually do, but there was no hand-waving, gesticulating, raised voice, aggressive body language – on either side. Is this good? Does it lead to repression? Does self-restraint increase the likelihood of the problem being resolved?

What's the best way of getting to "YES"?

There has been some research carried out in the way that business meetings are conducted in various parts of the world. A typical British meeting will involve the 2 sides identifying the contentious issues, suggesting to each other ways for resolution, but the deal does not have to involve blood on the carpet immediately. There can be a rescheduling of the meeting during which further gradual progress can be made, and relationships preserved. In certain Middle Eastern (and even European) cultures, that kind of meeting would be considered a complete failure. Each side goes in heavy from the outset, and they tackle the most sensitive and apparently immutable issue first. They shout and are rude to each other. They get angry and impatient. The atmosphere is unpleasant quite quickly. But they often get to "yes", and because people expected the shouting and rudeness, no-one is hurt by it. If it was important to you, why wouldn't you shout?



Styles vary in mediation as to how to conduct that first plenary joint meeting (assuming there is one). Of course, each mediation requires its own approach – but I used often to encourage people not to sour the atmosphere straightaway in the opening session. I still think it's generally good policy not to come to blows before the mediation has really left the starting blocks.

*There is however, something to be said for not dancing around the elephant in the room.*

That's the big issue that has divided the parties, so why not grasp the nettle straightaway? It will raise its head anyway.

Sometimes if you diffuse the issue in the opening meeting, it becomes more manageable later in the discussion.

I once heard from a fellow mediator of a mediation she had conducted, in which a not particularly attractive offer was made early in the morning to a Japanese Corporation. It took the Japanese the entire morning (inevitably) to reject it, and when the perplexed mediator asked them why it had taken them so long, their response was that they thought it might be considered rude for them immediately to reject it outright, and also that they wished to be courteous to her as a woman.

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a spot of passion is  
cathartic & productive



So one has to be alive to culturally different approaches, and take one's cue from the parties. People will always have their own styles, and the mediator has to be sensitive to this. We tend to think that a civilised discussion and reasoned analysis of the issues will lead to resolution – and in my experience, with the right attitude on both sides, that is right. But that is not to say that a quick identification of the elephant coupled with a screaming match doesn't also work for some people.

It's surprising.

I've also returned from Sweden with an even greater appreciation for smoked salmon and pickled herring.

I wasn't expecting that either.

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