

Hot seat

Marco Blankenburgh

Although Dubai has scores of nationalities living and working side-by-side, just how culturally integrated we? *Time Out* spoke to Marco Blankenburgh, director of **KnowledgeWorkx** - a company which specialises in cultural training - to ask him whether he thinks Dubai is a cultural melting pot. Interview by *Jeremy Lawrence*

Your company teaches intercultural intelligence to businesses in Dubai. What exactly is this?

It's a relatively new concept. We developed it over the past five years in the UAE because this is such a good testing ground. As we tested the theory, we realized it was valid for the ability to deal with intercultural polarities, and it's a skill that you learn. That's why we call it intelligence in line with the theories of Professor Gardner from Harvard University. He developed the idea of the seven intelligences. He argues that IQ is a serious misnomer because it only tests verbal, mathematical and logical intelligence. As children, we go through schools where the focus is on exams. Gardner says that when it comes to success in life, yes, IQ plays a part but there are other skills that count equally, if not more so. As a result he developed these seven intelligences- verbal, spatial, musical, physical, mathematical/logical, intrapersonal and interpersonal. Another academic, Daniel Goldman, popularized the last two into emotional intelligence. When we started working on this, we realised that people moving across cultures who have a high level of emotional intelligence can do much better.

'We make a huge distinction between being a cultural critic and being a cultural learner'

Is there a big problem in Dubai with people not being able to adopt culturally?

It is a serious and growing issue - especially now that the pressure on people, in terms of cost of living and quality of life, is rising. It seems that tolerance is starting to diminish as a result. There are three ways of dealing with intercultural dynamics. The most obvious one is that people clash and some people even take that for granted. The other dynamics are more hidden. We co-exist but don't really mix, and we assume that it is supposed to be this way. So if I appoint a boss from a certain nationality to lead a certain department, it's assumed that people from that nationality will start appearing and sooner or later they will be the majority. If you have a social event at your company, you typically see people from the same nationality grouped together and the is no real synergy among the team. What we are trying to do is create a third way where people learn that each culture has its own strengths. If you bring interpersonal skills into the equation you will create synergy. Teams that take this on board

can achieve at least 30 percent higher levels of productivity and efficiency. Some people don't see it as an issue. Others say, is it true that we can achieve so much more efficiency? If so, let's look at it in more depth.

Is Dubai a cultural melting pot or salad bowl?

It's more like a vegetable soup. It's a mixture but you can still see the pieces. I see people who have such a high level of intercultural skills- they flow between different cultures effortlessly, they have no issues in hiring a multicultural team, they socialize with different cultures- there's no bias there. But then you have the other extreme where people only surround themselves with their own kind and they find it difficult to have people from other nationalities on their team and would rather get rid of them.

Can you see a common identity forming among the many people who live in Dubai?

I think Dubai is at a crossroads. If you go to some of the newer neighbourhoods, you can start seeing cultural groupings coming together in some neighbourhoods. Dubai is a new cosmopolitan city and will face the challenges that older cities around the world have had to face in terms of integration. That's why I think intercultural intelligence is so important. Dubai has an enormous opportunity to adapt smoothly, but at the moment the forces are such that people are still making polarising decisions rather than integrating decisions. I know that newspapers and magazines are getting more feedback and letters that hint in that direction.

Are 'workers eating cats' type of news stories helpful to the process?

One of the phrases we use is: are you adding value or making a value statement? You have to be extremely careful not to make value statements. We make a huge distinction between being a cultural critic and being a cultural learner.

Should people be paid equal salaries regardless of their nationality?

Yes. It helps to create true cultural synergy and attached value to the individual's skills rather than their nationality. You can't do it overnight but I believe the market needs to go in that direction, though it does take time. It is so entrenched that it could take years to change. Slavery was abolished 200 years ago but the effects of it haven't gone away; apartheid ended but it is still a big issue in South Africa.

Give us an example of cultural misunderstandings that exist here.

The way people make decision is a big case in point. Northwestern Europeans and Americans tend to focus on the rules side of policy procedure. The other side of the coin is where people will put the emphasis on the



relationship with the other person. You might break the rules because rules come and go but the relationship persists. You even see it with the police. They are now more rules-focused, but in the past you could talk about it, and you might have had the number of someone to call. There's also the polarity of status. In some parts of the world, status is achievement focused, whereas in other parts of the world, status is ascribed. People who move from achieve status backgrounds to ascribed status cultures can find it very frustrating.

What's your opinion about the Emiratisation process?

You see exactly the same problems in other countries that have affirmative action such as South Africa and Malaysia. It is a worthy cause but it needs to be handled in the right way. The government has done a lot of things well, but they're still discovering how it is you turn the programme into a full holistic process-fully integrating into the workplace, and it takes time. It's not easy, but I think they're pushing it in the right direction. What you sometimes find is that companies sometimes just do the numbers. They just hire the required amount, but there are no processes to successfully integrate these people, bring them on board and make sure everybody embraces the new reality. ●