

The Organisation of Chaos

Recently, I had the opportunity to drive a car in my birth city of Hyderabad, India which I left for Australia when I was five years old. I found it to be a very stressful experience because there was very little adherence to laned driving, the use of indicators and often a reluctance to follow traffic signals. In the West the psychology is individualistic. Therefore, I stay in my lane and only change lanes by using an indicator so that the person behind me knows that I am turning. However, in India, the psychology is mass driven. In a country of over 1.3 billion people, the sheer volume of traffic can be over whelming. Many people decide where they are going and just head in that direction, overtaking from the left and right without indicating, taking U turns which are forbidden, not giving way when required and competing with millions of auto –rickshaws, scooters, motorbikes, cycles, cycle rickshaws, buses, taxis, trucks and the teeming masses crossing the roads. Sometimes traffic may be held up by a herd of water buffaloes or in rural areas, a group of lazy goats lying on the road. All you can hear is the incessant cacophony of horns announcing: “I’m coming! I’m coming! Make way!” So within this chaotic mayhem; this jigsaw of disorganisation, there is an organisation which is not always apparent to a foreigner. Drivers often use their hands to indicate they are turning; they sometimes turn their head and make eye contact politely requesting right of way or simply blow their horn so others will clear the way. Needless to say you cannot drive at the speeds one is used to in the West due to the sheer volume of traffic and sometimes the conditions of the road.

As I gained more experience on the road I gradually began to understand this organic traffic system; this order within the chaos; a system that worked within a very different cultural context to Australia. Therefore, it is important as leaders to not impose our own value system upon another culture we have no experience in or are new to. How often do world leaders make decisions in contexts they know little about? These decisions couched in, and made from, their own cultural base can often have deleterious effects. We need to be slow to judge and more tolerant and open to different ways of thinking and operating. We need to step back from our own cultural reference points and be cognizant that these reference points are not commonly held or universal. If we can begin to do this with patience and sensitivity, we will have begun to develop cultural empathy which is critical for developing leaders in terms of decision making and understanding the other.

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8/10/2010