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### **What does Interculturalism have to do with Reality TV? - Shilpa Shetty & the Big Brother racism row**

**Here's an intercultural perspective on a recent media storm around racism in a UK reality TV show. I liken it to the working conditions of a global project team. Lessons from the TV show are used to draw out strategies for success in global working.**

*"Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster." - Prof Geert Hofstede*

For some reason, the Shilpa story has fascinated me since the storm broke on Monday 15th Jan. I have never been a Big Brother viewer, let alone fan. However, I caught snippets of it that week while working away from home and flicking through TV channels as one does in hotels. I noticed Shilpa and thought to myself, oh, an Indian woman on Celebrity Big Brother, that's interesting.

So I listened up when the row broke about Shilpa being subject to 'racist abuse' by some of her housemates. What's most interesting is the level of public outrage that this has sparked off in the UK and elsewhere.

Wait – a one minute backgrounder for those who have no idea what I'm on about. Shilpa Shetty is an Indian Bollywood star and was one of the housemates on the British reality TV show Big Brother. People live in close quarters under constant camera surveillance and one by one get voted out, and the ultimate winner stands to gain a lot. Careers and fortunes have been made by succeeding at this ... erm, sport. Jade and others were accused of being racist towards Shilpa, prompting over 40,000 complaints; more than any other show in the history of British television.

The issue received blanket media coverage and brought the racism debate to the fore once again. Tony Blair & Gordon Brown (in India at the time, where, understandably, feelings were high) have had to comment on what escalated into a minor diplomatic issue.

Work in the intercultural field often seeks to understand *difference* and how to leverage its synergy in relationships and in business. 'Race' and culture being closely related, we can learn lessons from BB that apply to the workings of a global, multi-cultural team.

**Global Project Teams and BB:** The BB housemates live together in a stressful and highly-charged environment. It's a hot-house with little opportunities for relaxation or privacy. Sound like the conditions a typical global project team works under? When people are under immense pressure and the stakes are high, difference is often perceived as a threat. Alliances are nurtured and the outsider can become the 'odd one out'; an experience we might remember from the school playground. And adults can act just as ornery as children can, except we do it with more sophistication and discretion!

After Jade's eviction, she appeared on national TV to face tough questions about her 'racist bullying'. To her credit, she was mortified, apologised repeatedly, and admitted that the relevant footage of her was "nasty and horrible". Let's use some of the offending behaviour to draw out lessons on how we can be consistently effective on global assignments.

1. **Realise the importance of cross-cultural understanding** in developing effective working relationships. Actively grow your skills. "Splat" comments on MSN: "The likes of Jade and Danielle simply don't have the brain power to consider differences in culture." I disagree that intelligence is the prime requisite – most importantly, we need an attitude of openness and willingness to learn. We need to recognise and suspend our assumptions at least temporarily.
2. **Understand *difference* from both a 'head' level as well as a 'heart' level.** From the 'head' level, you might learn about the target culture by attending some training, or from literature, popular culture, or anecdotal evidence.
3. **From the 'heart' level, you stop and notice your own reactions and discomforts.** You work on these so that you can engage with sincerity and curiosity, without evaluating difference *negatively*. You engage in dialogue, seeking to understand rather than judge. Build rapport by using people's names and learning how to say them. Shilpa was referred to as "the Indian" or "Princess" – this objectifies people and denies them basic courtesy.

4. **Develop excellent communication skills.** In the incident of the (possibly) undercooked chicken, Jade and co would have fared better had they thanked Shilpa for cooking and then expressed their concerns, followed by suggested solutions. Likewise, what might have happened had Shilpa used the emotional intelligence technique of disclosure about her feelings and desired outcomes?
5. **Resist the temptation to form cliques.** It's natural to seek familiarity when we feel threatened. Jade had her mother, boyfriend, and two female housemates as allies. Gossip was rife. Ask: how is this behaviour serving the situation? How it helping or hindering me or the team?
6. **Ignorance is no longer an excuse.** Jade is 25 and may have grown up with limited exposure to other cultures. Lack of awareness doesn't make it OK to judge difference negatively ... *oh, in India they eat with their hands??!* Channel 4 admits a "clash of cultures and class" in the house. They deny overt racism, stating: "unambiguous racist behaviour and language is not tolerated in the house." As we surely know by now, racism and other forms of unacceptable behaviour are often *covert* and *subtle!* Participants on BB are real people and real people are prejudiced the world over. The Carphone Warehouse, Europe's biggest mobile phone retailer, suspended sponsorship of the programme because it did not want its name associated with racist bullying. Think about how "ignorance" could impact on your organisation's credibility or your team's work.
7. **Most importantly, through our attitude and action, we can create a resonance** that echoes right through a team. Resonance can be defined as richness or significance, especially in evoking emotional commitment. Creating resonance is crucial in enabling a global team to deliver consistently high performance against the odds. We had a taste of this in the BB house when Jermaine, the African American Muslim, sought to rally the housemates to lay aside petty rivalries.

Let me close with a few lines from Craig Storti's wonderful book, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*: "Cultural effectiveness comes at the cost of vigilance and sustained effort. It requires that you keep a close watch over how you spend your time, that you resist the natural temptation to seek out the familiar and the comfortable, that you train yourself to monitor your emotional states, and finally, that you try not to judge --- before you [understand]."

I realise all of this takes a deep personal commitment. This is the way holistic leadership works – from the inside out. In the absence of that commitment, we can hope for an enlightened 'ticking the boxes' approach and getting the job done ... but watch out, when the pressures mount the cracks might begin to show, as we have seen on BB!