

CORPORATE ALLIANCE FOR GOOD
PRESENTS

POWER UP YOUR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

TO INSPIRE AND EMPOWER YOU
TO APPRECIATE AND RESPECT
DIFFERENT CULTURES



CORPORATE ALLIANCE FOR GOOD



POWER UP YOUR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

Supported By:



Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence
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*The names and others in the stories have been
changed to maintain confidentiality.*

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S FOREWORD

Wilson Tan

In today's increasingly diverse and interconnected world, it is essential for us to understand, appreciate, and effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

In the context of globalisation, cultural intelligence becomes crucial as it helps individuals and organisations navigate the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and adapt to different cultural norms and practices.

The book "Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence" aims to inspire and empower you to appreciate and respect different cultures, understand the importance of social cohesion, and become more confident in relating to individuals from various cultural backgrounds, therefore building harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Singapore is a great example of a country that has embraced globalisation and recognised the value of promoting cultural

intelligence. As a global financial hub and a melting pot of different cultures, Singapore understands the need to navigate and understand diverse cultural contexts in order to thrive in the globalised world. The country's diverse population, consisting of people from various ethnicities and nationalities, creates a rich cultural tapestry.

The importance of cultural intelligence in Singapore can be seen in various aspects of life. In business, understanding cultural nuances and customs is essential for successful negotiations and building strong relationships with international partners. Cultural intelligence is also crucial in the social and personal spheres. Singaporeans pride ourselves on our multicultural society and strive to create an inclusive and harmonious environment.

Together, by embracing diversity and promoting cultural understanding, we can play our part to help Singapore position itself as a global leader in cultural intelligence and set an example for others to follow.

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DEFINING CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

Culture can be defined as the ideas, customs, and social behaviours of a particular people or society. This can apply to ethnic and religious groups.



Cultural intelligence refers to the skill to relate with others and work effectively in culturally diverse situations. It is the capability to cross boundaries and thrive in multiple cultures and subcultures.

With its strategic position in Asia and cosmopolitan workforce, Singapore boasts of a connectivity to other nations, yet at the same time, Singapore can easily fall prey to sensitive racial and religious issues around the world. Hence, in this book, a chapter is devoted to explain the

importance of cultural intelligence in Singapore.

Anecdotes on navigating cultural nuances as well as concise tips presented at the end of the chapters are included to power up your cultural intelligence.

DISCUSSING THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE IN SINGAPORE

Tay Li Hui



Singapore is known to many as the little red dot on the world map. People sometimes mistake us for a city or nation that is part of the Republic of China, and no doubt, Singapore and China share many ties because of our past immigrant movements and historical links.

Singapore may be small in geographical size, but we have much to offer to our close neighbours and counterparts, attracting thousands each year who come seeking better jobs and better lives for themselves and their families.

We may remember the early nation-building days when we referred to the main

ethnic groups as CMIO: Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others. It was a straightforward and concise way of identifying ourselves.

Today, however, we have certainly outgrown these categories and identities. With our growing diversity and immigrant population, we find ourselves needing to deal with the issue of multiculturalism versus a melting pot of social make-up of our country.



Multiculturalism can be defined as a demographic make-up of a country where various cultural divisions are accepted for the sake of diversity.¹ A melting pot, on the

¹ Giam, Gerald. (2009). "Singapore: Multiculturalism or the melting pot?"

<https://geraldgiam.sg/2009/07/singapore-multiculturalism-or-melting-pot/>

other hand, is a society where all the people blend together to form one basic cultural norm based on the dominant culture.²

Singapore, a city-nation, has undergone significant movements and trends when it comes to navigating and shaping multiculturalism and developing a local identity and culture of our own.

A small city-nation that houses almost six million citizens will inevitably face intercultural issues.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in his 2021 National Day message that Covid-19 (Coronavirus disease 2019) has strained fault lines in society and brought up difficult issues and stressed that Singapore needs to manage race and religion issues carefully.³

² Ibid.

³ Elangovan, Navene. (Aug 8, 2021). "Recent incidents show racial, religious issues highly emotive, don't mean that S'pore's approach is failing: PM Lee." Today Online.

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/recent-incidents-show-racial-religious-issues-highly-emotive-dont-mean-spores-approach>

He pointed out that it took several generations of sustained effort to bring the different races and religions together, and that Singapore must not give up this balance among the different communities and it must continually adjust this balance to maintain social harmony.⁴



There have been several high-profile racist incidents over the past few years during the Covid-19 period of mounting anxieties amidst lockdowns and safe-distancing measures.

In May 2021, a 30-year-old Chinese man was arrested for allegedly assaulting and hurling racial slurs at a 55-year-old Indian

⁴ Ibid.

woman who was walking along Choa Chu Kang Drive.⁵

Mr Lee expressed disappointment that a racist attack could happen in Singapore, adding that stress from Covid-19 did not justify racist attitudes and actions, nor abuse and assault.⁶

The following month, a lecturer from Ngee Ann Polytechnic made the news for confronting an inter-racial couple.⁷

⁵ Kamil, Asyraf. (May 11, 2021). "Man, 30, arrested for alleged racist attack on woman along Choa Chu Kang Drive." Today Online.

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/man-30-arrested-alleged-racist-attack-woman-choa-chu-kang-drive>

⁶ Elangovan, Navene. (Aug 8, 2021). "Recent incidents show racial, religious issues highly emotive, don't mean that S'pore's approach is failing: PM Lee." Today Online.

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/recent-incidents-show-racial-religious-issues-highly-emotive-dont-mean-spores-approach>

⁷ Oh, Tessa. (June 17, 2021). "Ngee Ann Poly to sack lecturer over racist comments to inter-ethnic couple, Islamophobic remarks in class." Today Online.

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/ngee-ann-poly-sack-lecturer-racist-comments-inter-ethnic-couple-islamophobic-remarks-class>

In his National Day message, Mr Lee also touched on the anxieties Singaporeans face over the large number of foreign work pass holders in Singapore and the competition for jobs.⁸ These are but some of the potential situations that may give rise to interracial and intercultural conflicts.

Could these incidents be a reflection of the people's anxieties and tensions felt living in a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society?

Consider the following scenario. We look at our neighbours, the ones who live next door, the ones who serve our food, the ones whom we work with, and we may identify differentiating factors such as language, accent, skin tone, hair or eye colour and dressing.

⁸ Elangovan, Navene. (Aug 8, 2021). "Recent incidents show racial, religious issues highly emotive, don't mean that S'pore's approach is failing: PM Lee." Today Online.

<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/recent-incidents-show-racial-religious-issues-highly-emotive-dont-mean-spores-approach>

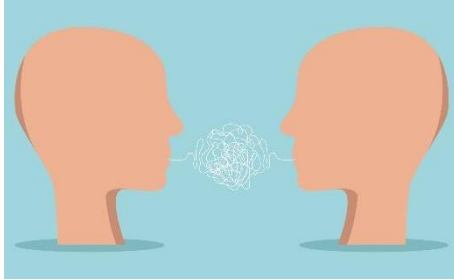


In our closer interactions, we may then identify differences that go beyond physicality and appearances. We realise it may be hard to find common ground, given the differences in our values, beliefs, backgrounds and experiences.

When we find ourselves drawing these distinctions and lines against one individual or against a group that seems different from ourselves, we may begin to build up walls and defences to protect ourselves. When we do that, it's easy for us to fall into the trap of the in-group versus out-group mentality where we identify and associate with those in the in-group and we discriminate or exclude those in the out-group.

While it may feel safe to seek comfort and partnerships within our in-group, we

effectively tune out anyone whom we deem to be in the out-group and we close the door to communication and mutual understanding.



Any situation that involves tension between the in-group versus out-group may also give rise to misunderstandings, further conflicts, and alienation.

We become narrow-minded, focusing on ourselves and our needs and we lose the ability to exercise empathy, to put ourselves in the shoes of others and consider from their standpoint.

The differences which seem so benign at the start can easily breed mistrust and doubt which may escalate and fuel tensions in the long run, making any form of collaboration or partnership difficult, if not, impossible.

We may find ourselves behaving defensively against members of another ethnic, racial or religious group. We may find ourselves in a reaction mode.

When we react instead of respond, we immediately jump to protect and safeguard ourselves. The outcomes may benefit only one party and we find ourselves caught in deadlock situations that demand a winner and a loser.

Choose to respond and not react. Start by identifying points of similarity with our neighbours.

What if, for instance, we talk to the neighbour next door and discover that he equally finds it troubling how dimly lit the stairway is and has even tripped over himself a few times when climbing up home? What if, upon closer interaction with him, we discover that he has just moved into the neighbourhood recently, is from a foreign country and needs help understanding English? This gives us an opportunity to build relationships with the neighbour with whom we share the same building, facilities and living spaces. This gives us an opportunity to share common

struggles and seek solutions together as we strive to live within a shared community and space.

When we have open conversations with one another, we may learn that we are not that different after all, and we can learn to trust one another with our common struggles, to identify common ground and shared goals, and to mutually invest in the relationships with one another for the benefit of all parties.



Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

Respond, not react to reduce tensions in cultural differences.

Doctor Henry Cloud and Doctor John Townsend write in "Boundaries"⁹, "When you react to something that someone says or does, you may have a problem with boundaries. When you react, they are in control. When you respond, you are."

Reaction is a survival-oriented defence mechanism, often made without thinking. Response is a thought-out and conscious decision. In conflict resolutions, culturally related or not, don't just listen to react, listen and hear so you can respond. The solution is to not focus on winning an argument or getting your way, but to resolve the conflict and move on.



⁹ Cloud and Townsend (1992). Boundaries. Zondervan. Boundaries and Your Family, pg. 133.
<https://ati.dae.gov.in/ati12052021.pdf>

REALISING YOUR BIASES

Andrew Sabaratnam

It is believed that Covid-19 was caused by a virus that originated from animals and spread to humans. In December 2019, the first cases of Covid-19 were identified in Wuhan, Hubei province, China. But the exact origin of the virus and how it jumped from animals to humans are still under investigation.



Newspapers reported at the time that the United States President referred to the virus as a Chinese virus. His remarks sparked a global outcry because Coronavirus does not discriminate based on race or ethnicity.

Under public pressure, the President eventually stopped making that remark. However, his action to stop came too late

because by then his words had sparked fear of Asians, especially those living in the United States. Asian-Americans reported that incidents of racism and xenophobia had escalated. Whether through overt discrimination or unconscious bias, the President's words fuelled hatred against Asians.

What can we do to uproot bias and xenophobia? We must be aware of our values and beliefs. Do they cause us to have negative views about other races and cultures? Discover your biases. This will help weed out any unconscious or conscious discrimination against certain cultural groups. You will become a better person and a respected person when you stop seeing everyone as a Chinese, Malay, Indian, Filipino, or Indonesian race. Rather, consider all races as members of one human race.

Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

Your values and beliefs shape your perception of the world around you and influence how you interact with others.

You may not even be aware of the stereotypes or prejudices you hold. You

may even act on them without realising it. For example, you may favour people of your ethnicity. You may think your cultural values are universal, and that everyone thinks like you. You may even judge others based on your values and standards if they do not share yours.

Being self-aware will help you become more accepting of others. You will also recognise that everyone's actions result from underlying influences. You will be more cautious about what you say. You will not harbour prejudices or discriminatory thoughts. You will treat others in a respectful manner.



RAFT-BUILDING

An Interview with A Mixed-Race Couple

Bala was brought up by traditional Indian parents in India. He came to Singapore when he was in primary three. In his own words, he has become 'a son of Singapore'. He met Dawn, a Chinese girl born in Singapore, at their previous workplace, fell in love, now married to each other for five years and have a lovely son and daughter.

I had asked them to share an anecdote on how their different races had posed conflicts between them in their marriage. They paused for quite a while, seemingly unable to share one. I quickly found out why.

With a smile on her face, as she recollected those days leading up to their wedding, Dawn began to share, "Both Bala and I are Christians. His parents are Hindus and mine are Christians. We know that his parents would want us to go through Indian Hindu rites and rituals during our wedding. We really want to

honour our parents as best we could, so we did lots of research work and read up on what were some customs we could include in our wedding that would not compromise our Christian faith.”

Bala’s parents had expressed that they were not comfortable with a church wedding.



“And that’s okay, it is just a venue when it all boils down to it,” said Dawn.

The result was a Christian solemnisation held in an Indian restaurant with a Chinese tea ceremony and exchange of garlands. The couple did both a wedding march in, and an Indian dance after, and everyone got to enjoy Indian food that beautiful wedding evening.

Till today, Indian breakfast is served in their home on Sundays and there is an Indian meal on the table at least once a week.

“We are more Singaporeans than we are Chinese or Indian,” said Dawn, to which Bala echoed yes.

Having navigated these cultural and religious differences and tensions during those early days, Bala and Dawn have come to apply principles that work for them. One of them is to set clear and firm boundaries. She and Bala have agreed that whenever differences arise, the communication channels must be clearly defined.

“Should the issues arise from Bala’s parents, he talks to them. When it comes to my parents, I talk to them,” Dawn shared.



When their daughter was born, while it was customary for Indian families to have the girl's ears pierced and head shaved, Bala and Dawn decided not to do it as that was apart from their Christian faith. While they celebrate Deepavali, they do not participate in the temple prayers. They are very clear what the 'non-negotiables' are.

“And that allows us to be open about exploring and sharing everything else, culturally,” Bala concluded.

Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

R – Reduce Tension: Read and Research Reduce potential tension due to cultural differences through research and reading up on what you can do that are within the convictions and values you hold, yet at the same time, respect and honour others.

A – Act on Convictions

Do your homework and then act on your beliefs and convictions confidently by drawing healthy boundaries.

F – Find the Middle Ground

Give and take. Confronted with a “stalemate” in negotiating cross-cultural differences, communicating, and making it work.

T – Think Others

In any relationship, cross-cultural or otherwise, respect and honour is key.



REALLY MEH?



A critical ingredient to powering up your cultural intelligence in Singapore is savouring the sizzling “Singlish” (Singapore English). With nuances in its use, Singlish may be more complex than you think. Really meh? Absolutely. You check out this chapter lor.

Speak to Singaporeans and you may discover that many of us consider Singlish part of our national identity. We have come a long way, though, in this complex relationship with Singlish over the years.

The SG101 website is a website “to tell the stories of Singapore’s journey as a nation, and through the stories, help Singaporeans understand what makes Singapore it is today, and what makes us Singaporeans”. According to SG101,

English was first introduced to Southeast Asia when the British colonial settlers arrived in the region in the late 1700s, and eventually arrived on Singapore's shores in 1819. However, Malay remained the lingua franca until the beginning of the 1900s. In the early 1900s, institutes of higher learning that were taught in English were established. Consequently, proficiency in English became key to social mobility in terms of further education and employment opportunities.

By extension, English took on greater and greater importance, such that at the end of British colonial rule, English had become a language of prestige and was often used as a lingua franca between different ethnic groups. This more widespread use of English led to the birth of a colloquial variant used in informal domains, influenced by the different languages and dialects spoken – also known as Singlish.

In 2015, when poet Gwee Li Sui explained the nuances in the use of Singlish, he said, "I do know that Singlish is a beloved part of Singaporean life that intrigues many. Foreigners and Singaporeans alike can't get enough of it."



Shall we now have some fun with Singlish terms? Bear in mind that there are exceptions to the rules of using these Singlish words and when you get corrected in using them, it's okay. It's like that one lor. These are explanations to the use of terms like lah, leh and lor.

I dun have lah. - I really don't have it.

I dun have leh. - For some reason, I don't have it.

I dun have lor. - I wish I had it, but sadly I don't.

I dun have liao. - I used to have it, but I don't anymore.

I dun have ha. - I remind you that I don't have it!

I dun have hor. - Don't look at me; I don't have it.

I dun have mah. - It would help if I had it, but I don't have it.

I dun have meh? - You think I don't have it?

I dun have siah! - I can't freaking believe I don't have it!

Let's put in more examples and explanations.

Lor.

With “lor” comes a sense of resignation and indifference.



A: Hey, I think we have to redirect how our project work should go.

B: Okay lor. I guess that's the way to go.

A:: Do you have any replies from our sponsors yet?

B: Don't have lor...

A: I think we should ask Mrs Lim for help.

Meh? Lah! Leh.

“Meh” poses doubt. “Lah” is dismissive yet somewhat confident. “Leh” is more self-directed and less resolute than “lah”.



A: I heard the project work results will be released tomorrow.

B: Really meh?

A: I'm so nervous, I'm gonna ask Mrs Lim now if we did okay.

B: Can ask her now meh? Thought must wait to collect the result tomorrow.

A: Can lah. Mrs Lim is very kind.

B: No lah, we shouldn't exploit her kindness leh.

A: No lah, I'm just saying. I won't ask her. You seem to be very confident we have done well.

B: No leh. I am not overly confident but I have peace in my heart.

Hor. Mah.

"Hor" invites consensus and agreement.

"Mah" is mild but certain.



A: You always look calm and collected hor.

B: No matter the result, I hold the outcome loosely. I enjoy the process mah.

A: That's a good attitude I want to learn leh.

B: We are learning together.

Liao

“Liao” is simply “already, done”.



A: Have you checked in with Chris if he can join us tomorrow to go and collect the results together?

B: Checked liao. He can. Chris also says we will surely go for a celebration for good results. He is the most confident among us.

A: Win liao lor.

I trust you have enjoyed the Singlish flavour. Singaporeans do appreciate and value both Singlish and standard English by learning to navigate their use in different contexts.

Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

Next time, when you relish delicious curry in Singapore, try saying, “The curry is shiok man. Sedap. Good sia.” Indeed, you can get really yummy curry in Singapore,

RELISHING CURRY

When it comes to relishing curry, (from the Tamil word “kari”, which means sauce), here in Singapore, we are blessed with many flavours, a mix of Indian, Malay and Chinese influences and tastes melded together into a uniquely Singaporean culinary dish. You can order a curry dish from a Chinese, Indian or Malay stall at the hawker food centres and get ready to experience the explosion of the complex taste of curry inside your mouth.



A curry dispute became a hot topic in Singapore in August 2011. A Singaporean Indian family cooked curry and the strong smell wafted to their neighbour’s home. As their neighbours, a migrant family from

China, had never tasted curry, they could not appreciate the smell of curry.

Without going to the details of the dispute, what came out of it was something beautiful. Grassroots heroes, in response to the curry incident, organised a campaign, “Cook and Share a Pot of Curry”.

The initiative encourage Singaporeans to cook curry at home and invite foreigners to share the dish. Curry feasts were enjoyed on this island city of Singapore, celebrated as part of our way of life in a same-same-but-different community.

This heart-warming story shared by a young adult also surfaces the beauty of looking out for one another in our community.

He shared, “During my childhood days, we used to live on a floor where we had a mix of different cultures. Everyone was very friendly, sharing food and taking care of each other like a community. A particular experience for me was that I forgot my home keys one day after school, and my family would return only that evening. I knocked on my neighbour’s door, informed

them of the situation and asked if I could wait at their home till my family got home. They quickly allowed me inside, gave me food and took care of me.”

Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

Regardless of race, language or religion, Singaporeans bond through our taste buds. Gathering for hawker food is a national past-time. Common sights include people of different races and cultures sitting together round the table, creating memories over delicious food and candid conversations. The key is to show respect towards and embrace the commonalities among those in your community.



RELAK LAH!

“Relak lah” is Singlish for “relax, don’t worry... take your time”.

We work in teams comprising people of different temperaments and personality traits coming together. Some team members are highly driven while others are more laid-back.



When we are part of a team with different strengths and approaches to accomplishing goals, something that can happen is that we experience differences, and we have incorrect judgments. This is because we have different temperaments and personality traits.

Consider this: What happens if you try to make someone “fit” how you think they

should act? How would you feel if they do that to you?

There is an old saying that goes, “If you want to understand someone’s point of view, walk in their shoes.”

The concept is that you have to have experienced what they have experienced to know why they are the way they are. Being aware of this fact is a step up to power up your cultural intelligence.

It is true that you will want to seek to understand yourself and your team well to make the most out of this project time. Bear in mind that like you, they also have a life of experiences that have made them who they are.

When you and your team go through a project together, learn about one another’s personality traits, workstyles, cultures together. The experiences could yield some of your best moments in spite of the challenges one could face at times. How then should you treat one another during this project so that as you are learning and moving forward together well?

Power Up Your Cultural Intelligence

The key is to respect each other. Communicate as honestly and tactfully as possible. Ask if you want to know something. Don't assume silence means consent. Avoid the comparison trap. There is strength in diversity, there is more than one way to skin the cat. Relak lah!



REITERATING EMPATHY

Andrew Sabaratnam

Finally, you will read a compelling story by Andrew Sabaratnam on how he navigates “casual racism” in Singapore even as he concludes how important it is to show empathy, “People who actively exercise empathy are also intuitively more accepting of and sensitive to the differences of those from other cultures.”



Here's his story (*extracted from Good News for Bruised Reeds: Colours of the Kingdom*):

Today, as the world becomes increasingly connected and accessible, the number of encounters we might have with people of different cultures in Singapore, is

increasing. But before we can even talk about that, the idea of racial harmony still needs some nurturing in our society. Although the phrase “regardless of race” is written in our pledge, it is something that needs active, intentional work too.

I am not talking about overt racism – this is generally frowned upon and people generally are mindful of it.

I am talking about casual racism, those seemingly inoffensive type of comments that may highlight a person’s physical or cultural characteristics for the purpose of caricature or mockery. It may seem inoffensive to the majority but it certainly marginalises, denigrates, or humiliates those who experience it. Harm can take place even if comments are not motivated by hate or malice. It attacks the dignity of the recipient as an equal member of society and it can undermine civility and social cohesion.

To bridge the chasm of racial and cultural differences with love requires us to be empathetic towards other people of other races and cultures. I would like to share some of my personal stories and experiences, in the hope that it would

remind us all to be more empathetic towards other races. The stories may seem disparate and unrelated, but they come together to form the sum of my experience in society and I hope that it helps you to better empathise.



To be empathetic is to put ourselves in the perspective of the other person; the ability to imagine the feelings of the other person in a particular situation and to act in such a way to show we care. We may not be aware that we hold stereotypes and harbour prejudices. We may even act on them without realising it. Actively choosing to show empathy towards those who are different from us can help address the unconscious bias in us.

My name is Andrew, and I was born into a Christian family and I am also a born-again

Christian. I have an interesting ethnic background. Although I look like a South Indian, both of my parents have their roots in Jaffna, Ceylon (the old name for Sri Lanka), where there is a large population of Tamils. So, I am a Sri Lankan Tamil. But this fact is known only to me. Since a large portion of Singapore's Indian community is characterised by an ethnic Tamil majority (which includes Tamils from both India and Sri Lanka), it is only natural for Singaporeans to assume that my ethnicity is Indian Tamil.

I was born in Malaysia, but I decided to come to Singapore in 1988 to pursue a career as a lecturer at a polytechnic. I have since become a citizen and I am proud to call Singapore my home. Singapore has treated me well, and I am a beneficiary of the meritocratic system in Singapore, being recognised and duly rewarded for my contribution to education. However, in the last 32 years, I have experienced racial remarks thrown at me. Fortunately, they were few and far apart. Sadly though, I discovered that they were based on assumptions, ignorance, stereotyping, and unconscious bias.

The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Singapore was that whenever I was in the company of Singaporean Chinese, they tended to speak Mandarin to each other even while in my presence. In many other countries, such behaviour would be considered rude and inconsiderate. Personally, it felt to me much like the equivalent of whispering in front of others while being in a group, which is equally impolite. Such impolite behaviour has hardly been pointed out and addressed in schools and so it seems to me that it is subtle behaviour that carries on – both in school and at work. Truth be told, this makes me feel alienated from the rest of the group as I cannot participate with ease. It also makes me feel awkward as well as out of place.



Casual racism can turn up in conversations when you least expect it. One day, a

Chinese colleague was relating an incident he had with another Chinese colleague, “Andrew, when I asked him why he did it, he became angry. His face turned black!” The first time I heard that, I was taken aback. It does not matter what skin tone is mentioned – blackface, brownface, yellowface, redface – any coloured face you mention that is not yours is racist. Being dark-skinned, I was offended by the remark, but I also realised that this word had become common usage among Singaporeans – so much so that nobody thinks twice about using it in front of an Indian. But to an Indian, it gives an impression that dark skin carries a negative connotation and creates a negative impression in their minds. It can inevitably lead to inferior feelings among the Indian minority in Singapore.



In Tamil, Aneh means big brother. It is anecdotal that over the years, many

Singaporean Chinese refer to Indians as “Apu-neh-neh”. It is perhaps derived from the word Aneh, and was given an extension because it sounded Tamil. It is hard to disagree that this has been used as a derogatory term in identifying Indians. In connection with this, an Indian friend once related a story to me. When he passed by a Chinese grandmother dragging her crying grandchild, she remarked to the child, “If you don’t stop crying, I will give you away to Apu-neh-neh”. It needs no further explanation that such remarks will only make a child grow up being hostile to dark-skinned people. Needless to say, my friend was offended.

In my early years at the polytechnic, we often got bored with the limited choice of food on campus and would venture out to the nearby hawker centres. One day, I went out for lunch with a pretty, young, Chinese female colleague. There was a group of men sitting together and they observed us walking past them. One of them made a remark in Chinese that caused my colleague to look upset. When I asked her what the man had said, she conveyed that he said this: “Her mother never taught her manners.” This incident

happened in 1989. It was inconceivable in their minds that a pretty, young, Chinese lady would want to be seen together with an Indian man.

Well, we are now in the twenty-first century and I would like to believe that the new generation is not so myopic about friendship among the races. I currently work with a lot of younger people (those born between 1981 and 1996) and I do not see this at all.



They are more accepting, or perhaps it does not cross their minds that I am different. It is perhaps important to add that I have a part to play in promoting racial harmony. I, too, must not be so self-conscious of my ethnicity. I must see others as no different from me. I should not feel superior or inferior to others. That might help others to see me beyond the colour of my skin. If I make an effort to

blend and not be aloof, this too, helps people to see me as simply a colleague and not an Indian colleague. And if anyone offends me (knowingly or unknowingly), I must be ready to forgive and move on.

Still, sometimes people make jokes that appear innocent on the surface in the hope of getting people to laugh. However, just because some people find it funny, this does not mean that all find it funny (or that it is of any humour at all). Although this might be a rather dated example, I recall that in 1992, in a parliamentary speech, a then Minister of Parliament (MP) remarked, "One evening, I drove to Little India and it was pitch dark but not because there was no light, but because there were too many Indians around." The MP later apologised in Parliament. The point cannot be any clearer – when some colleagues make racial jokes about me or involve me, they expect me to laugh with them. They would then say, "I hope you can take a joke", but the truth is that racial humour in all its forms is fundamentally offensive. It is prejudice in jest. It insults and belittles a person because of his or her race.

In 2000, I was appointed a Deputy Director at the school I was serving in the polytechnic. I was also the first Indian to be made a Deputy Director in the school. After hearing the news of my appointment, a Chinese colleague confided in me that someone told him it was better to trust a snake than an Indian. Until then, I had never heard that being said about Indians. But I was not affected by it. After all, it is God who controls all things. And also, in life, you cannot expect everyone to like you.



One of the reasons why racism exists is perhaps because of ignorance. I recall once I took a group of Japanese and Singaporean Chinese colleagues to a South Indian restaurant in Little India where food is served on a banana leaf. The Japanese loved the hot, spicy Indian food. One of my Chinese colleagues, in her mid-thirties, told me that was the first time she

was eating a South Indian meal, and in Little India too. My Japanese colleague laughed at her and told her that she comes to the restaurant with her friends every Saturday for lunch after playing tennis! The Japanese had no problem being adventurous in a foreign land, whilst perhaps the Singaporean Chinese lady had not been willing to venture out to understand Indian culture. To my Chinese colleague, Indian food was roti prata (Indian bread normally served with curry for breakfast) from the local Indian stall. That was the sum total of her understanding of Indian culture.



Once I was invited to a Christian gathering. I was already a Christian then, and most people in the group knew that. There was this nice elderly lady serving chicken and beef sandwiches. I was the only Indian in the group. As she offered the sandwiches to me, she asked if I ate beef. I chuckled

and I reminded her that I am a Christian and not a Hindu. She gave me an embarrassed smile. She might have assumed that all Indians do not eat beef. Some other false assumptions are that all Indians speak Tamil, and all Indians are IT (Information Technology) specialists. We could all afford to understand each other's cultures more, and certainly beyond our pre-conceived notions or assumptions.

When dealing with minority races then, it is important to show empathy. In all things, common sense should also be used as a guide – there is really no sense in teasing a person because he or she is of a different race or making jokes at that person's expense because of his or her race or culture. I hope that my personal stories help you to appreciate this with greater perspective. People who actively exercise empathy are also intuitively more accepting of and sensitive to the differences of those from other cultures.

Footnote:

Nicole Ong, Ng Zhi-Wen, Ronald J.J. Wong, Prarthini M. Selveindran, Jonathan Cho and Tan Soo Inn eds., Good News for

Bruised Reeds: Colours of the Kingdom.
(Singapore: Graceworks, 2021).

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POWER UP YOUR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE



The importance of cultural intelligence in Singapore can be seen in various aspects of life. In business, understanding cultural nuances and customs is essential for successful negotiations and building strong relationships with international partners. Cultural intelligence is also crucial in the social and personal spheres. We pride ourselves on our multicultural society and strive to create an inclusive and harmonious environment.

Together, by embracing diversity and promoting cultural understanding, we can play our part to be forward thinking in cultural intelligence and set an example for others to follow.



In today's increasingly diverse and interconnected world, it is essential for us to understand, appreciate, and effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

- Wilson Tan -

Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Alliance for Good Ltd

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