

A Global Role for Black Americans

By Thomas S. Watson, Jr.

We are going to share some experiences and some stories, and we are going to talk about the skill of cultural flexibility. The first thing that we need to do to bring some meat to this concept is to define terms, so I will do that first. I will describe cultural flexibility and its related skills and environments. Then it seems to me that it might make sense to talk a little bit about the changes in the global environment and the domestic environment and how these changes have an impact on the need for cultural flexibility. Third, we will then talk about the dominant cultural group in the United States and why it has never had the need to develop cultural flexibility before today. Fourth, we will talk about the most important rising cultural group in the United States from my perspective, since I happen to be a member of this cultural group. We will talk about why African-Americans had to develop cultural flexibility, what cultural flexibility means, and how this skill can now benefit the broader community. And fifth, we will talk about cultural flexibility replacing cultural arrogance in the leadership of the United States, and from there, the leadership of the world.

Recently I delivered a speech similar to this—a little more entertaining than this one is intended to be—to the Cleveland Rotary Club. Rotarians do some singing before the speaker comes on. One of the songs they sang was very appropriate, even though they didn't realize it when they set the agenda for the day. It was "I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover, That I've Overlooked Before." Many of you may remember this song.

Well, that is precisely what we are talking about here today, because we are operating in an environment where the United States needs skills that exist in the United States but are not generally called upon. We are going to talk a little bit about where those skills are, what the skills are, and how to call upon them from this point forward.

What is Cultural Flexibility? Cultural flexibility is a skill, a mental habit of addressing first the need for finding common values, interests, concerns and experiences between people, rather than allowing ourselves to be distracted by the physical and superficial differences between us. We generally respond to other people based upon what we see at first impression. A culturally flexible person is one who has learned over time that people who have a different physical appearance are still people who must be reckoned with, worked with, allied with. Over the years we have learned that if your skin is not brown or black, if your hair is not as short as mine, if your eyes are blue, if you wear a different kind of clothing, or you speak a different language; or you have a different accent, there still may be something that we have in common.

We, as African-Americans, have found a way to bridge differences in culture. We have found a way to identify things that we and other cultures have in common. We've had to do that to survive. So over the years, African Americans have developed an attitude and a skill that was important for us when it was not important for the dominant cultural group in the United States.

The flip side of cultural flexibility is cultural arrogance. Cultural arrogance simply is the opposite of cultural flexibility. It's a mental habit of focusing so narrowly on the superficial differences between people that you never allow your mind to explore the things that you may

Thomas S. Watson, Jr., is chairman and founder of Watson Rice & Company, a CPA and consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

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have in common with them. It is shutting off the communication before an opportunity for alliance and understanding can be developed.

Cultural diversity is a term that we use a great deal. Many people in the United States use the term and aren't sure where it came from. It originated with John Naisbitt in his first studies about the United States and its future. John Naisbitt has been saying for over ten years now that the cultural diversity of the United States is its most important asset in maintaining competitiveness in a global market. After his repeated use of the term, people picked it up, and now we have cultural diversity consultants. We have people talking about the diversity in the work place, the diversity in the classroom, the diversity in the market place. Cultural diversity is a description of an environment: it is an ambiance of the work place, of the market place, of the classroom.

The fourth term to be defined here is **cultural sensitivity**. Cultural flexibility is a skill, cultural rigidity is a response, cultural diversity is a description of an environment, cultural sensitivity is an outreach. Cultural sensitivity is learning the language, the mores, folkways, customs, and values associated with a culture. One can be culturally flexible without having cultural sensitivity for all the thousands of cultures in the world. But the skill of cultural flexibility will open doors for you to build cultural sensitivities for specific cultures.

Now, I'm going to tell you a story, specifically because what I have just described is something that most of you are hearing for the first time. Assimilating something as different as cultural flexibility requires not only rational thought, but also personal experience. So, I will tell you a story about a man and a snail.

Imagine a man walking down a road, looking up in a tree, and seeing a snail. For no apparent reason, he spoke to the snail.

"Hello, snail."

The snail could talk. "Hello. Who and what are you?"

"I am a man."

"A man? By the way, what are those stalks that you are upon?"

"Well, these stalks are legs, and the legs have feet attached to the end of them."

"Oh? And what pray tell are these legs and feet for?"

"They are for moving around very rapidly."

"Oh, you are a curious creature. Is there anything else different about you?"

"Yes. You have your house on your back and you carry it with you every where you go."

"Yes, yes, of course, all snails do."

"Well, we men have many houses, and we go in and out of them at will."

"Really? That's strange. Is there anything else strange about you?"

"Well yes. A man can use a leaf. You know a leaf?"

"Yes, yes, leaf like these on this tree."

"Well, a man can take a leaf, make marks on it, give it to a woman, who gives it to another man. That third person, from looking at the marks on the leaf will know what the first person was thinking."

The snail stops for a minute, and says, "Oh, I know what you are. You are a liar! And the trouble with liars is that they tell one lie and then another lie until they finally overreach themselves!"

The point of this story is obvious to some and not quite so obvious to others. There are experiences which people have that are real, practical, everyday experiences to them but which are completely foreign to others. What I am talking about here is the development of cultural flexibility, which is necessary for an understanding of how to build cultural sensitivity in a culturally diverse world. Many people will have to come out of their snail's shell to fully appreciate and participate in this process.

Global Village. Let me discuss our changing environment. We all know that the political, social and business environments of the United States and the world are changing at a very rapid pace. We know that microchip technology and air travel have shrunk the world. If we choose to, we can communicate by telephone, by facsimile or by satellite transmit information to any place in the world that has a unit to receive our message. That communication can be completed in seconds or minutes. Should we choose to leave our current location for some other far-flung spot on this globe, we can be almost anywhere in the world within 24 hours.

There are therefore not many opportunities for people to put up barriers and hide from the rest of the world. Oceans do not protect us. Mountains do not protect us. Valleys do not protect us. We are all one world. We are all a very small global village.

Now, the reason that this fact is important is because before now people had the luxury of remaining culturally arrogant if they chose to. They could decide to have one nation, and that nation to have one race, and that race to have one culture. They could close themselves off from the rest of the world. This is no longer an option available to anybody.

So in today's environment, in today's culturally diverse world, we must find ways to adapt ourselves, our systems, our methods of communication in recognition way the world has changed. It is very important that we understand—and all of us have read or heard lectures from one futurist or another—that not only has the technology of the electronic age shrunk the world and taken away the opportunity for barriers and isolation, but also that there is no option of turning back. We are moving forward to a smaller world in a culturally diverse environment where none of us has the option of hiding from the rest of us.

The reason that nations are coming apart, that new nations are arising; that new alliances are being formed, is because of the changes in the global market place that are caused by the new technology. The culturally diverse Soviet Union came apart because its leaders attempted to use an industrial age management strategy in an electronic age environment. The Soviet government tried to restrict communication so that its people would not know what was happening in Western Europe, when the people could obtain a satellite dish and find out everything that was being published or broadcast from any place in the world. It attempted to maintain central control when people had become sufficiently educated to want to influence, if not control, their own destiny. The Berlin Wall did not come down because of a victory or an action on America's part. It came down because of a change in the global environment.

The reason the United States is still strong—and is still the strongest power and the strongest economy in the world—is because the United States, with its culturally diverse environment, was forced to adapt to the changes that are now taking place in the global market. With the riots and the civil unrest of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, we did not really seriously change our values, but we changed our ways of communicating. We changed our ways of managing. We changed our ways of responding to the U.S. citizenry. New methods of communication are pushing the U.S.A. to become a more flexible nation. So when the pressures of change came on the global level—pressures that broke up the Soviet Union—the U.S.A. was able to adapt politically to those changes.

African-Americans played a prominent part in making the U.S.A. a more flexible nation. We acquired the skill of cultural flexibility when our counterparts in the dominant cultural group had no need to develop this skill.

Why do I say that? What do I mean? In the Industrial Age, the commerce of international business was done according to U.S. rules. Most used English as the language of international business. Most used the U.S. dollar as the currency most common in international business. And they used Western values as the set of standards to measure people's participation in international business. In that process the U.S.A. was able, through the political, military and other powers to force others to adapt to the U.S. way of doing things.

Today, even though the U.S.A. is still the most powerful nation in the world, it is not the only nation with power. There has begun to develop a balance of power: Japan has economic and political power in the global market place; the European Community is developing a power that will rival the United States; the former Soviet Republics have power in the global market; the Middle East oil cartel has power in the global market; the vast resources and infrastructure of southern Africa as a region have power in the global market. There is not a single concentration of power, and there cannot be dominance by one nation. When the U.S.A. is now in a position of cooperation, when it now has a need for expanding alliances with other nations and cultures, other skills, in addition to the core business skills will be necessary.

Culturally Arrogant Responses. Now, even though many in this nation realize the need, even though the buying public and the general citizenry realize it, the leadership—political, business, social leadership—does not uniformly acknowledge that a new skill is needed. A survey conducted by Korn Ferry questioned chief executives of major U.S. corporations about international business. The question was: "How important is learning another language, other than English?" Many said it was of little value. Another question was, "What impact will the combination of 12 European nations into a single European Community have on the global market place?" The answer was, "Very little." From these two responses, you begin to get the drift of their collective opinion. It represented cultural arrogance.

Now, even though top executives in major corporations hold the insular opinions that were reported in the Korn Ferry survey, their opinions are contrary to fact. People who report to them—the other senior executives and middle management—clearly understand that multiple language proficiency would be helpful; cultural flexibility is vital; multiple cultural sensitivities are useful. The chief executives are putting pressure on their organizations to excel in global competition. Using their limited set of standards, their organizations will not excel.

So, even though we have a natural, almost knee-jerk reaction rejecting cultural flexibility at the top level—political, social, and business. In the United States, the pressures of the market place and the pressures of day-to-day operation are bringing a fast realization to the second tier of management that we need to use cultural flexibility to build bridges to global markets. We need to find some way to open U.S. corporations to other cultures, and to integrate with other bases of power in the world. It is only through alliances that we will be able to maintain preeminence and prosper in this very different, new world. But what we are finding is resistance at the top, realization right below them, and quandary among them all. The open question is, "Where do we find the skills we need?" "How do we build them into our corporations?"

Well, what I said in the beginning—the song "I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover That I've Overlooked Before" was an appropriate beginning for this or other similar speeches—was because this nation holds the opinion that African-Americans are on welfare, are inept and need quotas or special help just to be able to compete with white Americans. Many in this nation still hold that opinion—and that opinion is wrong! It is absolutely, unequivocally wrong! African

Americans have achieved political integration into this society. We have learned to be CPAs, attorneys, marketeers, engineers, and managers. We have been elected to public office and have served well. We have been ordained into the ministry and have served well. We have been chief executives of private, non-profit organizations and have served well. We have built the same composite package of skills that any competent professional in the United States must possess to succeed. We are prepared to perform on a global level and to be chief executives in multinational corporations.

African Americans have learned the skill of cultural flexibility. We had to be able to adapt and build alliances without forgetting who we are, without trying to be white. [I cannot make my eyes blue or my hair blond, and I don't want to. But, I must be respected. I must build alliances with other people in the political, social, business, religious environs where I live and work. And I have found a way to do that: cultural flexibility.] Other African Americans are ready and willing to do the same.

Now we are in an age where leaders in the United States must have skills which build alliances with people unlike themselves. Isn't it logical that African-Americans, who already have such skills, should step into openings of leaderships to help take this nation on to the next step in the global market? It is absolutely, perfectly, understandably, wonderfully logical, isn't it?

Need for Cultural Flexibility. Why isn't it being done? Why aren't we moving forward, in the numbers that we should be? Why aren't the opportunities opening up, in the numbers that they should? Primarily, because of unawareness and fear. I did 110 public appearances last year, in South Africa, in Germany, in England, in Mexico and across the United States. I made these appearances because cultural flexibility is important to the survival of this nation, and because I have a lot at stake. I have a 26-year-old daughter who is an engineer, a 23-year-old son who is an accountant and a 12-year-old son who is not sure what he wants to be yet, but he'll be something. And I intend to live another 30 or 40 years. So, I have a major stake in the future of this nation, as does everybody else here. I'm on the podium passing on the message of cultural flexibility—the skill that it is—the conditions under which it has been developed; the need for it in the global market place—specifically because we all need to know about it and we all need to act on it.

I have been told that statements like those I have made only have credibility when they come to life. They only come to life when you can give specific examples of people who have done what I am talking about. Well, here are specific examples: 1) There is a woman named Paula Cholmondeley who was hired by a company named Faxon to run its international division. At the time that she was hired, the international division was diffused, confused, and unprofitable. Within a short period of time she fixed things. She increased the gross revenue for that division from \$50 million to \$65 million. She created twenty new jobs in the United States. She changed the way the division was managed so that it was able to acquire a German competitor who was a major competitor in the European market. The international division operates from offices in Boston, Toronto, Tokyo, and Amsterdam. One of her major challenges was Japan. [We've heard about the Japanese and how narrow they are supposed to be. They are not willing to take direction from any executive who is not another Japanese person forty years older than themselves.] One of the things that Ms. Cholmondeley did was to teach a 60-year-old Japanese man how to do strategic planning from the Faxon perspective. He has bragged about how much he has learned from this 40-year-old black woman.

There is Marcus Griffith who has spent 40 years in the hair care business. The products that he makes are for my kind of hair. But Marcus sells his products in 25 nations, including England, Germany, and Mexico. He has been able to employ 4,000 people. He has created an economic entity that will stand long after he is gone. His company is called Hairlox.

Egyptian Experiment. I have first-hand, personal experience of the benefits of cultural flexibility. I am not just talking theory. Watson Rice & Co., the accounting firm that I founded and am still Chairman of, has done many international projects. One project we were engaged by the Egyptian government to do was a joint venture to design an automated computer system for a project of theirs. The joint venture was between Watson Rice and one of the very large accounting firms. We put our teams together with the best possible people from both firms, and our teams went over to Cairo to design this computer system. Within 30 days of our team's landing on the shore, the Egyptian government wanted to cancel the contract. Their attitude implied, "Get out of our country.... Go Away."

The top management of Watson Rice & Co. discussed the problem with the top management of the other accounting firm. We said, "We've already lost this contract anyway. We have nothing more to lose. Let's experiment. Leave the team there, but change the leadership. Put the Watson Rice partner in charge over the other firm's partner. Put the Watson Rice partner and manager in charge of the entire team." We did. Six months later we completed the job. We were not kicked out. We even got a letter of commendation from the Egyptian government on what a great job we did.

We didn't change any of the staff. We didn't change the work plan. We didn't change the design or the implementation strategy. We only changed the team leadership. The only difference between the Watson Rice staff and the other firm's staff was that Watson Rice staff are multi-cultural and culturally flexible. So they had an enhanced sensitivity to the Egyptian way of doing things, the Egyptian way of communicating, and the Egyptian culture—its mores, folkways. That made the difference on this job.

I've given you three real examples: one from a professional service firm; one from a black-owned manufacturing firm; and one from a white-owned, major industry in the middle-market in the United States.

Where does that take us? It takes us to a need for establishing a process for those who are culturally flexible to teach those who are not. We have to work hard on this process. There is a true story told to me by a woman who was a language teacher. She teaches Spanish and Portuguese. She was engaged by the State Department in a prior Administration to coach the Secretary of State and prepare him to deliver a major address in South America. She coached him in the language and presentation. Finally in exasperation he said to her one day, "Who do you think you are, trying to tell me how to say things? I am an Ivy League graduate. I am the Secretary of State. I know what I should be saying." The woman said she smiled and gave a very simple response. "Mr. Secretary, I am just trying to explain to you that what you are saying is not said that way in Spanish." There was such a dramatic difference between what she understood and what he understood.

There was a photograph in the newspaper recently of our current Secretary of State, who was in China, and his Chinese counterpart. His counterpart was sitting straight in his chair with both feet flat on the floor and his hands on the arm rests. Our Secretary of State was leaning back in his chair, "sitting on his tailbone" with his legs crossed so that his sole of his shoe was facing the Chinese executive. This was a photograph in a U.S. newspaper. Now, most of us know the significance of that, don't we? It was an insult, wasn't it? His posture and the position of the sole of his shoe were blatant disregards for the values, concerns, and mores of the Chinese. Yet the Secretary was attempting to negotiate an alliance with him and to resolve international disagreements! We have a long way to go, don't we?

Time to Step Forward. Many of us understand how to take the U.S.A. down that long road toward national cultural flexibility. Many have already developed the needed skills and sensitivities. It is time for culturally flexible African-Americans to step forward and say, "I am willing to be the Secretary of Commerce, or the Under-Secretary for International Trade. I am willing to be the U.S. Trade Representative or other significant, political Cabinet-level appointee in this upcoming Administration," since we have a Presidential campaign coming up. African-Americans have to step forward and say, "I am willing to be the Vice President for International Business in a major corporation, or in a smaller one." If they are running a company, they have to stand up and say, "I am willing to put my company in a joint venture with a larger company to do business outside the United States."

On the other side, those of the dominant cultural group who already have decision-making powers in their hands must acknowledge that they alone cannot solve today's economic problems. We have an economy that some people say is in a recession, others say in a depression. But now, as we look forward, those who are in power must acknowledge that they don't have all the answers. They must reach out to people from other cultural groups, to change the complexion of the leadership of this nation. As we learn to do that, as we learn to integrate other cultural groups into the leadership of this nation, we will be an effective, globally competitive nation. To the extent that we fail to do that, we will continue to decline.

