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Taming conflict varies across cultures and shapes the way society deals with it. In other words, we operationalise culture based on our societal values. In Britain, where our core value is â€˜fair playâ€™ (wit implied equality), our system of law is adversarial and about winning through argument. For this to happen, we all need to be equal in the eyes of the law. Likewise in the United States; but that, and their extreme competitiveness shape their need for harsh sanctions and punishments

In the Nordic countries, whose core values are equality and irenics (unifying difference), the law is based on consultation, mediation and compromise, and is part of the civil code which is meant to be educative rather than punitive. Laws are designed to give a moral lead rather than to coerce. Punishments are designed not to offend dignity. This removes articularly physical punishments and sanctions causing psychological harm, and instead punishments are mostly based on community service and fines, with prison sentences being perceived as harmful. Russians, on the other hand, believe compromise is for the very weak, but reach agreement if it can be proven the other side has struggled very hard and will make the first concession.

In Britain and the United States, we are so used to the concept of â€˜Innocent Until Proven Guiltyâ€™ that most of us would find it impossible to live under a judicial system where the burden of proof is upon the defendant, and not upon the State. Yet his is what happens in Italy, as witnessed by the recent court case (where an American student was found guilty of killing her colleague) which had American society crying â€œfoulâ€•. France still lives by â€œThe Code Napoleonâ€• which has little belief negotiation or compromise because, in its view, concessions tend to lead to loss of power and status â€“ prestige can be best served by taking a conflictual stand. Hispanics view law as an expression of the ideal, almost a work of art, which may be admired and appreciated but which does not necessarily apply to them personally.

In many cultures emotion is not merely recognised, it is used as an indication of integrity. In the Middle East, what one says in front of the court is more important than what has been written down. The Maoris believe that speech is meant to be from the heart rather than in a more prepared way from the head where facts may be more carefully contrived.

In the Arab world, Asia and Africa, where much value is placed on saving face, a third party is used as a go-between. This will either be a traditional elder, revered for his wisdom, knowledge and relationships, or someone known to the parties who is familiar with the history of the situation and the webs of relationships. Even President Kennedy acknowledged, in his memoirs, â€œDonâ€™t humiliate your opponent,â€• which is, of course, a central face issue. Third parties may use different trategies with quite different goals, depending on their cultural sense of what is needed. In these cultures, gaining or restoring face is as important as avoiding loss of face.

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Hello, I'm Deborah Swallow and, for the last fifteen years, I've worked in over thirty countries

addressing the complexities of people working internationally across multiple cultures or a cross cultural communication so individuals and organizations alike can gain an authentic competitive edge and win in international markets.

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