Cultural intelligence and global leadership: Time to let go of being on time?

Randall S Peterson argues that rapid innovation in places like Kenya and Peru prove we need to let go of old and unhelpful habits in today’s multicultural, global business context.

I n 1988, Roberto Goizueta, a Cuban chemical engineer at the head of what was perhaps the most American of all US companies. Yet, with Goizueta at the helm, Coca-Cola transformed from a long-standing slump in performance and went on to become the best known trade-marked brand in the world, outperforming the S&P 500 by 80% in less than a decade.

One of the things that distinguished Goizueta’s tenure was his ability to take risks; to spot opportunities and leave no stone unturned in his drive to take the organisation international.

Underpinning this was great instinct for how he collected information on which to base decisions. From his bi-monthly habit of eating lunch with different workers in the employee canteen to a system of gathering facts first-hand from friends and associates in different countries all over the world. Goizueta was adept, said former executive assistant Clyde Tuggle, at “educating himself about the world in which we operated and how that affected business.”

In 2010, following the failed COP15 climate change conference in Copenhagen, Christiana Figueres inherited something of a poisoned chalice when she was appointed Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. During her tenure, Figueres insisted on reframing climate change as a driver of success, many of my African colleagues will readily share the term “cultural intelligence” describes the ability not only to conform to different practices? They are both examples of leaders with humility to know that they are imperfect, that they don’t have all the answers and that they are capable of getting it wrong — and striving to improve.

In today’s globalised economy, whether you are in politics, a multinational, a non-profit or starting your own enterprise, a key to your success as a leader hinges on your ability to open up to difference: different norms, different priorities, different beliefs; or, simply put, different ways of doing things. Even if that sometimes means just letting go of being on time.