

Breaking the Code

Business prof helps his students navigate the cultural divide.

By Max Pearlstein

For New England residents, talking about the Red Sox may be as natural as drinking that daily cup of coffee; they don't even have to think about it. But if you're an international MBA student, discussing last night's game while you're waiting in line at Dunkin' Donuts may be as difficult as trying to hit one of Josh Beckett's ninety-five-mile-per-hour fastballs. Fortunately for those foreign non-members of Red Sox nation, Andrew Molinsky, assistant professor of organizational behavior at Brandeis's International Business School (IBS), is a pretty good hitting coach when it comes to deciphering the rules that govern social scenarios, like making small talk, which can vary wildly from culture to culture.

Seizing on an example that's close at hand, Molinsky says, "Consider an East Asian woman who is learning to participate in an American business school like IBS. In most classroom situations in East Asia, you're not expected to talk, and, if you do raise your hand and speak, it could be seen as showing off. So it would be extremely challenging for this woman to participate in my class."

Molinsky, who earned a joint PhD in business and psychology from Harvard, first encountered this sort of cross-cultural illiteracy when, as part of his dissertation, he helped foreign professionals from the former Soviet Union prepare for job interviews in America.

"They were trying to switch their behavior from what they were accustomed to,"



Andrew Molinsky (right) chats with a student.

Molinsky recalls. "For example, in Russia it would have been inappropriate to make eye contact during an interview, especially with a higher authority figure, whereas in the United States eye contact shows poise and enthusiasm."

Molinsky wanted to make it easier for anyone—from Russian job seekers to MBA

students—to learn how to act in foreign social situations, like job interviews, that are the building block for cultural adaptation. Today, he teaches this "code-switching" technique in his IBS course *Managing Across Cultures*.

The first step requires his students to identify a social situation that makes them

uncomfortable. As an example, Molinsky mentions a Swiss student who is having trouble making small talk because he views it as intrusive and unnecessary. During this initial phase, that Swiss student partners with several native “experts” who walk him through a series of exercises that illustrate the “zone of appropriateness” for American small talk. Using tools like role-playing or video clips, the student sees what kind of behavior is probable in the specific situation, what’s possible, and what’s unlikely or inappropriate.

Molinsky says it usually takes students about two weeks to settle into the zone. Once they’ve accomplished that, they’re sent into the field to practice on unsuspecting targets. For our Swiss student, that might mean striking up a conversation at a university dining hall. During the exchange, he knows that he doesn’t want to be overly positive or overly deferential; for example, a casual smile is a good thing, but an exaggerated one isn’t. Beyond this basic formula, though, there’s no script because,

as Molinsky points out, social life is not a play. Improvisation is key.

“In order for my students to succeed in that future job interview, they need to be able to function in a difficult environment that’s unpredictable, where they’re seeing their competence or incompetence in

woman described it as trying on pants that are three sizes too small.”

Despite their initial discomfort, Molinsky says his students, and their metaphors, display more confidence by the end of the semester. “I know I’ve made a difference when someone who was originally petrified

“I ask them to come up with a metaphor to describe what code switching is like. One woman described it as trying on pants that are three sizes too small.”

action,” Molinsky says. “It’s important for them to be in situations now where they feel anxious, or maybe even embarrassed, so they can learn from them.”

Molinsky gets insight into his students’ mindset from the course journals they’re required to keep during the semester.

“I ask them to come up with a metaphor to describe what code switching is like for them,” he says. “At the beginning, they might say it’s like diving into a pool of cold water, or learning how to ride a bike. One

to participate in class is later chomping at the bit to take part,” he says. “It’s really gratifying to help people who were struggling in a social situation and see the change in them.”

Or, to use a common metaphor, you could say it’s like hitting that fastball out of the park.

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