

A composite image of the Earth from space, showing a city skyline with skyscrapers, a green field, a rainbow, a hot air balloon, and an airplane flying in the sky. The sun is shining brightly in the upper left corner.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 121 DAYS

- A JOURNEY THROUGH GLOBAL
SAFETY CULTURES

ANDREW SHARMAN spends more time in the air than most airline pilots. Beyond the air miles and reheated food, how could all this globetrotting help us improve workplace safety? He shares what he has learned about cultures around the world

My work as a consultant in leadership and culture often takes me to some far-off places. With personal experience in more than 100 countries, travel has become part of my everyday life. The packing and re-packing of bags, endless airport queues, taxi hops to the hotel, saccharine hotel receptionists and sprints to catch the last aeroplane home are all part and parcel of my working life. The ensuing jetlag is managed with double espressos and in-flight napping.

Over the last few weeks I've been thinking more about my travels – particularly what I've learned from my encounters around the globe, and specifically about how this knowledge can help us improve safety culture and performance wherever we are on the planet.

IS THE WORLD GETTING SMALLER?

Back in 1873, the delightfully eccentric Phileas Fogg attempted to journey around the world in just 80 days, in order to win a bet placed by his friends. The story, as told by Jules Verne, was quite an adventure for Fogg and his sidekick, Passepartout, as they came to learn local customs and practice, while side-stepping language barriers with British humour and a sincere smile.

In 1889, American journalist Nellie Bly set out to mirror Phileas Fogg and completed the same journey in 72 days. Her experience resulted in a book with the tagline: "A novel and fascinating game with plenty of excitement on land and sea".

OR FASTER?

In America, the very first transcontinental railway line was created in 1869, practically uniting the States through steam power. Mass transit then really took off. In 1903, James Sayre took his turn, circumnavigating the globe using only public transport, in just 54 days.

OR SLOWER?

In 2001, aged just 24, Alastair Humphreys left England to cycle around the world. He returned four years later having completed an epic 46 000 miles across 60 countries. A feat that renowned British Polar explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes called "...out of the ordinary. In today's world of dashing up Everest in less than a day and best-selling books about three-month motorbike rides, Alastair's journey stands out as amazing. It was probably the first great adventure of the new millennium. Alastair's journey was an old-fashioned expedition: long, lonely, low-budget and spontaneous. It was a life on the road rather than a whirlwind break from home."

Perhaps we need to go more slowly? Last weekend, on returning home to Switzerland (from yet

another week working away with clients) I discovered my little village was hosting an energy conservation event. Wondering if that meant I could have the weekend with my feet up, I sidled along.

There I learned about an incredible feat of energy efficiency. Last year Swiss adventurers Bertrand Piccard and André Borschberg completed the first circumnavigation of the globe with no fuel. They flew 42 000 km over a period of 16 months in a solar-powered aircraft to promote the use of renewable energies.

AROUND THE WORLD, AROUND THE WORLD

You may be familiar with the French electronic duo Daft Punk. Their catchy anthems have taken dancefloors around the world by storm. In fact, their tune *Around the World* hit the top spot in dance charts around the globe when it was released – despite it having only one line (can you guess what that line is?) repeated 144 times.

It is, however, another tune of the same name that does it for me. In 1999, the Red Hot Chili Peppers sang:

"All around the world,
We could make time,
Rompin' and a stompin',
'Cause I'm in my prime.
I know I know for sure,
that life is beautiful
around the world"

As I write this article, we are already 121 days into the year – just like that. A review of my diary tells me that I've been in 12 different countries on four continents. This is technically no Guinness Record, but I've certainly been around the world.

Travel beyond your own country to anywhere in the world and you'll quickly notice the differences between your usual location and where you end up. For example, anyone who has ever visited Germany, Tanzania, Russia or China (four of the countries I've been in the last month) will certainly have their own souvenirs of the experience.

Each country is quite unique – and often easily stereotyped. Is every culture really that different, or are there some common aspects?

"VORSPRUNG DURCH TECHNIK" OR "IT'S ALL COOL, MAN"?

After touching down at Berlin's Tegel airport, to conduct a culture assessment for clients, my driver was already waiting at the agreed location. He was smartly dressed, the iPad in his hand clearly displaying my name and he promptly whisked me to the car – an immaculate executive sedan (German,

of course), which took off like a controlled rocket launch.

I was unpacking my bags in the hotel 25 minutes later, after a serious though uber-polite check-in that took no more than two minutes: they were expecting me and everything was ready for my signature and a swipe of the credit card.

I had an opposite experience the previous week in Tanzania. I nervously covered every inch of Dar Es Salam airport searching for my driver before he wandered along 30 minutes later with a shrug of the shoulders, a tattered, badly handwritten sign and a beaming grin. We crawled through potholed side streets in the back of a beat-up taxi until I fell out at my accommodation.

not interfering, or being seen as too friendly in a false manner.

Not so in Shanghai, however, where the hotel staff seemed more interested in playing a round of Candy Crush on their mobiles and giggling at this two-metre white giant than getting me to my room. Shanghainese typically don't want to offend, but see little wrong with tapping out a text message, or giving priority to their discussion with colleagues while the hotel guests wait their turn.

So, as organisations get bigger and the world gets smaller, what does all this mean for safety?

THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE

If we strive to go beyond the immediately obvious stereotypes such as German efficiency, effervescent French language, Italian masculinity, Japanese mindfulness, British humour and the American desire to "go large" with everything, what do we find?

Culture is often referred to as "the way we do things around here". While some may prefer a deeper definition, I think this simple approach is useful as it sums up just how all-encompassing a concept it is.

Following the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, where 31 people lost their lives, the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations defined safety culture as "the product of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies and patterns of behaviour that determines the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's safety programmes".

In China an attitude of pragmatism and persevering behaviour exists, and relationships have priority over tasks as people seek to fulfil obligations to family, teams and society before anything else. While delivering our safety leadership programme there, I focused hard on a "journey to excellence" underpinned by personal commitment, collaboration and core values to meet local cultural needs.

In Tanzania, a traditional approach dominates, where absolute truth is a core value, rapport is key and stability is critical. In the latter it's like Germany, though Germans have a low dependence on others, preferring to excel as individuals. There, inequality is minimised, and – like in Tanzania – change comes through evolution and superiors are easy to reach (rarely so in China or Russia). Recognising individual contribution, such as great safety behaviours, and continuous improvement helps in both countries.

In Russia and China people are highly dependent; hierarchy is needed and superiors are often inaccessible. Perseverance and hard work are behavioural norms (as in Germany), though in China relationships will always come before hard sweat. Values include self-discipline, honesty and respect.



Staff at the international-brand hotel seemed surprised by my arrival, though 15 minutes later they managed to get enough information from their computer to allow me to gain a keycard for a room, accompanied by warm smiles and elaborate finger-twiddling, elbow-pulling and fist-bumping handshakes aplenty.

Arriving in Russia at -20°C, I received an equally cold reception from the driver and hotel staff. They were matter-of-fact as they focused hard on getting the job done as quickly as possible. The stereotypical Russian no-nonsense style may come across as frosty, uncaring or disinterested to some, but as a regular visitor I understand that it's way more about

Change in these countries, as history underlines, comes through revolution: forget about incremental improvement here; think big, act fast, communicate clearly and drive a step-change in safety.

While the Chinese and (most) Africans tolerate ambiguity, Russians and Germans alike detest uncertainty – hence my efficient airport transfers and hotel check-ins – the need for due process, contractual obligations, laws and rules manifest in a desire to make the future as predictable as possible.

Contrast this with Tanzania where “pole-pole” – pronounced pollay-pollay and meaning “nice and easy” or “take it slowly” – is the most-uttered phrase wherever you go. There’s an inner urge to work hard and showing emotions is accepted (you’ll know when someone is pissed off in both countries).

So, in terms of safety, emphasis should be on defining principles for behaviour and defining plans and procedures.

SAME-SAME, BUT DIFFERENT

And so, finally, we return to Switzerland – from where I write this article. The Swiss are often stereotyped as neutral-standing time-perfectionists who eat a lot of cheese. And that’s pretty much true. Interestingly

though, they have a lot in common with South Africans – a high sense of masculinity, manifesting as strong ambition, decisiveness and admiration for achievement.

In both countries the focus is on teamwork (especially rugby), trying to avoid conflict and seeking to gain consensus and harmony. Safety improvement in both countries can come through a blend of robust (but sensible) rules and processes and through respecting order and hierarchy. There is also a need for space to work and for a balance between personal emotions and the inner urge to work hard.

I need to be at the airport in an hour and my driver has just knocked at the door. Thoroughly efficient, and as regular as (Swiss) clockwork, he’ll probably even have a selection of Swiss chocolates waiting in the back of the car for me to keep me going as I begin yet another journey around the world.

This time, though, I’ll be welcomed with a bear hug, an exclaimed question (“Howzit!”), and, if everything goes lekker, a braai with plenty of Mrs Balls *sterk blatjang* on the side. It’s funny that, no matter where I travel on this planet, some things remain as core values for everyone. **SM**



Sharman on Safety is based on ideas and concepts from Andrew Sharman’s new book: *From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture*. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and the Chief Executive of RMS – consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at www.RMSswitzerland.com.

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