# 1 It's an Adventure

## The Promise (and Perils) of Going Global



There was nothing left to do but sign the deal, a complex transaction between an Australian multinational company and a local Vietnamese group worth more than $5 million. Both teams had sent high-level executives to Hanoi to finalize the details. After several days of discussion, all parties came to an agreement. Stefano—who then worked for a global law firm and was representing the Australians—stayed up all night putting the terms into formal contracts.

The plan was for all parties to meet again in the morning over breakfast. Only one business item remained: the simple formality of collecting signatures on paper. Then, after a bit of mutual celebration, both sides could go home happy. Stefano's clients would be paying the Vietnamese those millions and getting much-needed services in return.

Except it didn't work out that way. As soon as everyone settled in together in the morning, the owner of the Vietnamese group spoke up. He said he'd been thinking about the deal. And he had decided he needed an additional $20,000.

Stefano could hardly believe what he was hearing. Twenty thousand was a mere fraction of a percent of the deal's total value. The amount seemed just enough to be annoying but not enough to cover any foreseeable cost or risk. Why, why, why?

That state of bafflement lasted only a moment. The lead executive for the Australians shot up out of his chair. He was furious, and he let the whole room know how he felt. He didn't care whether the owner wanted an extra $20,000 or 2¢. The ask, in itself, was a breach of trust. *We already agreed what the deal was*, he said. *We shook hands on it. And now you want to change the terms after less than 12 hours?* In his experience, the man said, a person who can't be trusted in small matters could not be trusted with important matters going forward, let alone for a long-term partnership. The deal was off.

With that, the Australians filed out of the room, drove straight to the airport, and didn't look back. Game over.

Fortunately, Stefano had learned a lesson about how to play the game. There came a time not long afterward when he served as counsel for a US company seeking entry to the Vietnam market. Different industry, different type of deal—and yet, the same scenario that he'd seen recently began to play out again. The Americans came to Vietnam and met with their prospective partners. After a couple of days negotiating, they had a handshake agreement. The Americans were jubilant that evening. They thought the deal was in the bag. Stefano laughed and told them, "Uh-uh, wait till tomorrow. There might be one more step; let me give you a heads-up . . . ."

Sure enough, before signing a contract the next day, the lead rep on the Vietnamese side asked for a small sweetener. Which the Americans gladly conceded, because they had been forewarned.

*Stories like this are common when you step into a culture that isn't your own.*

Crossing borders to do business in a new country, with a culture distinctly its own, is an adventure of high order. And the first rule of adventure is simple: there will be surprises.

The surprises you meet abroad are different from—and in addition to—the ones you face in your home market. You'll still deal with the usual business uncertainties, like unexpected moves by competitors. But layered on top of those are the surprises that come from culture gaps. These tend to knock you off course. They can feel confusing or even unpleasant in the moment, and sometimes the business consequences are painful. That's why learning to recognize and respond to them becomes so important.

In our international careers, we've sometimes been able to recover and course-correct quickly. But the persistent condition of living with uncertainty and perplexity can be reduced only gradually over time, not eliminated entirely. It's part of the adventure—and part of the work.

**Stefano soon learned that what he had seen wasn't an isolated incident.** In deal after deal, the same pattern emerged. At the last minute, after it seemed that all the terms were nailed down, negotiators on the Vietnam side said they needed an add-on. Maybe a slight increase in franchising rights or an added sliver of revenue share. Always, it amounted to no more than a cherry on top of the cake, or a few crumbs beside the cake. But always, the little extra was essential to closing the deal.

One could ask Vietnamese businesspeople why many of them do this. One could theorize on the deeper reasons behind the practice. Either way, you'd be likely to come up with a range of answers. Some would say that getting a little extra is a face-saving (or more accurately, a face-*building*) move for many people: it's a prize they can bring home to their spouses and tell their friends about, to show that they really know how to operate and come out on top. Some would say that in an emerging market like Vietnam—where widespread prosperity is a new thing and large segments of the population still live tenuously—negotiations are different than in post-scarcity economies like those of North America or Western Europe. Citizens of emerging countries are liable to see more value in every crumb and cherry.

All of the above may be true. Certainly it pays to dig for deeper understanding, whenever you encounter practices that seem strange to you. But meanwhile, there is the ongoing imperative to stay ahead of the game so you can ward off other mishaps.

Often, the seeds of failure are planted long before anyone recognizes a problem. Cultural misalignment begins with small assumptions and unspoken expectations. The earlier you learn to notice these signals, the easier it becomes to navigate new markets. It helps to reserve judgment whenever you encounter a culture gap, because people doing something differently from what you expect does not mean they are wrong. What matters is recognizing that your assumptions may not match the reality in front of you and learning to test those assumptions before they harden into conclusions.

When people begin to recognize culture gaps, something important shifts. They start to bridge them, not by changing who they are but by understanding the people around them more deeply and therefore knowing what to do. Over time, this becomes a reliable skill, one that turns confusion into clarity and turns unfamiliar environments into places where real connection is possible.

*Another story from our experience helps bring the point into sharper focus.*

Vinnie is one of many Silicon Valley veterans who made the switch from being an entrepreneur to a venture investor. The path is a logical one to follow: by launching start-ups, you learn what it takes to make them work. Which should then equip you to evaluate start-ups, invest in the most promising ones, and coach them up to their potential. It's a straightforward case of knowledge transfer. Many in the Valley have done it within the Valley.

The difference was that Vinnie chose to launch his VC firm in Singapore, a world away. That made him a pioneer. At the time, few VCs existed in or around Singapore, and there were plenty of tech start-ups that could use assistance with their ventures. It was smart of Vinnie to recognize unmet demand, and realize that by shifting from his previous role as a start-up founder, he could step in to give the market what it needed. There was just a slight catch.

A new VC firm is, itself, a start-up. You have to go around raising money for your first fund—pitching people with money to invest in you, so you can invest on their behalf.

Vinnie figured he knew how to fundraise. He'd done it in the Valley for his tech start-ups. But in Singapore, the slight catch turned into a major obstacle because the business environment and culture were not like those he'd known in the Valley.

Silicon Valley has an open culture, where trust is granted quickly. Once people decide that your credentials look good, you're qualified to pitch. If you pitch them a good enough idea, they'll jump on it. Vinnie remembers a fundraising meeting for his tech start-up at a coffee shop. It took only 20 minutes. He met the potential investor, presented his idea, waited while the man took a quiet moment to think, and when the investor looked up, he said "I'm in." Handshake agreement; both parties moved on; that was it.

Singapore culture didn't function that way. The speed of trust and the process of gaining trust were different. Credentials from Silicon Valley were enough to secure meetings with wealthy individuals and heads of business conglomerates, but Vinnie soon discovered that in Asia a single meeting rarely leads to a yes. And when he arrived for those meetings, the setting was often nothing like the casual coffee shops he'd known.

One potential investor granted Vinnie an audience at the VIP's table in a fancy restaurant, inside an upscale hotel *owned* by the investor. It was like being received at the court of a king, and elaborate rituals were required to win the man's ear. No quick-quick, get-it-done transactions were possible. Instead came a lengthy process of personal conversation and feeling out the personal timbre of the visitor and introducing Vinnie to family members and friends in attendance at the occasion (who likewise had *their* feelers working and would no doubt confer afterward to share their judgments). Just getting the pre-qualifications to pitch was a new kind of game here.

Furthermore, the ultimate responses were unlike those Vinnie had gotten in the Valley. Once, he'd had a chance to meet Reid Hoffman, the legendary PayPal veteran and cofounder of LinkedIn. The meeting wasn't to raise funds, just to connect over coffee. As the friendly visit wrapped up, Hoffman asked Vinnie: "How can I help you?" A generous offer, and one reflective of the Valley's culture. People see value in reaching out to extend and build their networks. A young stranger who appears to have a good disposition and innovative ideas is always worth welcoming into the loop, and that question stayed with Vinnie. It taught him the value of paying it forward, a habit he carries to this day.

But this wasn't the case with the Singapore investors Vinnie tried to court. They were people who had helped to build Singapore into the thriving place that it was—an achievement much to their credit. What counted in their loop was ability to contribute to their momentum, their way. Vinnie's pitch, when he was able to deliver it, did not meet that test. A venture capital fund? Responses ranged from "It won't work here" to "You're not the person to do it." Or, at best, "We'll think about it"—which turned out to be the code for "no."

Vinnie didn't raise a dollar, initially, from that tranche of investors. (They would come in later once they saw proof of concept.) To his credit, Vinnie eventually understood that the problem wasn't with his idea—nor was the problem that a lot of Singapore's top businesspeople were a bunch of clueless old reactionaries, an unmerited judgment. They weren't "wrong." They were part of a culture that had a pace and value system of its own. The problem was that Vinnie hadn't grasped the disconnects, the gaps. He'd been pitching the wrong idea to the wrong people at the wrong time.

So Vinnie adjusted. He raised the initial fund from investors outside Singapore and from Singapore's government—where people operating from a different perspective *within* the culture had actually created a financial incentive program to attract outsiders with new and valuable ideas. (Lesson: There are cultures within cultures. Target the ones that align with what you're doing.)

*Fast-forward 10 years.*

Vinnie's VC firm was now established in Singapore and investing across Southeast Asia, in multiple countries. One of them had been trending to top-of-mind.

Vietnam was looking more and more like a major growth market for early-stage tech investment. With a population topping 100 million and with a contract manufacturing base that was adding hands-on experience to an educated workforce, the country called for Golden Gate Ventures to have an increased presence. That meant an actual, physical presence. Although a flight from Singapore can reach Vietnam in just two hours and a few minutes, Vinnie knew that to properly *understand the culture* and nurture the contacts needed for intelligent, targeted investing, he would need to embed himself in life on the ground. (This is the focus of Chapter 4, "You Have to Be There.")

So Vinnie, his wife, and their children moved to Ho Chi Minh City. Before their furniture arrived, they found a bare, unfurnished apartment with enough room to harbor a growing family. And soon they met a neighbor who became a close friend. He was about Vinnie's age, invited Vinnie to join him for early-morning workouts, had children who quickly took to playing with his—and, at the very start of the friendship, when a money-transfer glitch left Vinnie's family with an empty apartment and no bed, he lent the American couple the money for a *mattress*. It was a small loan but a big gesture of trust.

You have been introduced to the kindly neighbor. His name is Stefano Pellegrino.

And that mattress was more than a gesture of friendship. It symbolized what this book is about: building trust across cultures in ways that textbooks don't cover. Closing deals isn't just pitch decks and spreadsheets. It's people, cultures, and connections.

*Key Takeaways*

- **Surprise is the starting point.** In a new culture, the first thing you'll encounter isn't opportunity, but unfamiliar behaviors that challenge your assumptions.
- **Growth accelerates outside your comfort zone.** When you step into unfamiliar cultures and environments, your assumptions get tested, and your learning curve sharpens fast.
- **Small gaps cause big consequences.** Most cross-cultural failures begin with tiny misunderstandings that snowball when assumptions go untested.
- **Reserve judgment when things feel "wrong."** What looks irrational or unprofessional through your lens often makes perfect sense within the local context.
- **Learn the pattern behind the behavior.** A surprise tactic is only surprising once; after that, you gain an advantage by understanding why it happens and preparing for it.
- **Trust moves at different speeds in different places.** A handshake in one culture seals a deal, while in another it's only the beginning of proving you're trustworthy.
- **Connection is the real work.** Closing deals across borders is ultimately about reading people, earning trust, and adapting to how relationships are built locally.