

Don't Waste a Cultural Bridge

By Theresa Sigillito Hollema

Loes Tenniglo was in a tough situation that many of us recognize – the frustration of trying to implement changes in another country. Loes, from the Netherlands, is smart and personable, so what was the problem? Here is her story:

“I had just started a one-year project to improve the productivity at our plant in Romania. The plan was to visit the location four times for 1 week each. The first time was to see the production and site. The second time was to go more in-depth on the project.

“Before I went, my Dutch colleagues were already warning me about the difficulties. They said the *connection* was always off, and that was my experience the first visit as well.

“The purpose of the project was to improve the production capacity, so the project would have benefited them to make more money and be more efficient. One of my first tasks was to gather data and I perceived they felt like I was investigating them, instead of the investigating the process. This was a gut feeling; for instance, they would be shy if I asked them things. And they were not enthusiastic about the ideas I was suggesting.”



During the second visit they would say “yes” without enthusiasm for her ideas, which would have benefited them. “I was not sure if I was being too direct, as is so often said about the Dutch. But on the other hand, I needed to do this!”

Loes returned to the Netherlands and thought the trip did not go as smoothly as she had wanted.

During a soft skills workshop with the [NextGen](#) cohorts, Loes listened to Ioana Plesea describe her experiences growing up in Romania, moving to the Netherlands for university, meeting her Belgian partner and living and working in the Netherlands. As Loes listened to Ioana’s story she realized this was someone who clearly understood and could explain the Dutch and Romanian cultures.

“When Loes told me her story,” began Ioana, “I immediately understood the communication issues she was having and was glad to be able to help her. Loes asked me in a way that showed she wanted to understand and learn.

“In the Netherlands, we ask a question without the background. We get straight to the point. In Romania, you need to be more elaborate – *I want this for ...* You need to supply a reason, even if you think it is less efficient. In Romania we want to understand the background, so we can do the job right. Also, by explaining the background, we get an understanding of how the other person is perceiving the explanation so that we can ensure we are both aligned. Loes’ direct approach made them feel like they had been doing something wrong all along. If she gives more background, then they recognize where her ideas are coming from.

“Another point is the expectation for meetings. In the Netherlands we discuss topics and people at the meeting are expected to give their opinions then and close off the topic. In Romania, we discuss the topics at meetings, but then everyone goes away and thinks about it. They consider the different alternatives and how their opinion will impact their peers. Then they come together again for a meeting and decide.”

How did it go Loes? Did you implement Ioana’s advice. “Yes, and it worked great! The conversation with Ioana was really a ‘light bulb’ moment for me. At first, I was uncomfortable because it was not my normal way of working. For instance, I made suggestions in a way that they felt like it was their idea in the end. We were able to implement the changes and the project was a success. I still have good contact with my colleagues in Romania.”

Thank you Loes and Ioana for sharing your story of the benefit of *cultural bridges*, people who can help to understand the cultures of their countries. Global organizations are full of cultural bridges – learn from one the next time you work across cultures.

For more information about your cultural bridges, contact Interact Global at info@interact-global.com