

Lost in communication: the sad story of the Lost Boys of Sudan

Last night I watched the 2003 documentary The Lost Boys of Sudan. The Lost Boys are a group of young men who managed to escape a brutal massacre of their people in Sudan and walked across the desert to end up in a refugee camp in Kenya. Many of the boys lost both parents or entire families and some have no idea what happened to their families. Some Lost Boys were repatriated to the United States, and this documentary focuses on two of them.

The documentary deals with the difficulty these boys have adapting to the United States. Nobody seems to tell them what to expect or how to navigate anything. Santino, one of the boys featured in the film, drives a car without a license or insurance and ends up hitting another car. He ends up in court where the judge tells him that it doesn't matter that he is in the process of getting a license, he is still responsible for not having one and driving anyway. His confusion and upset are palpable. He is earning \$7 an hour, and now he has more than \$500 in fines. Nobody explained it to him and he had no way of knowing.

Can you imagine being transported from a refugee camp in Africa to Houston, Texas? It must have been an extreme culture shock for these young men. And yet, they are greeted by two YMCA workers that speak to them in colloquial and fast English, even though the boys speak limited English, and it is not their primary language by far. And that is just the language gap. The film doesn't say much about these YMCA people, but it seems that they are clueless about the vast differences between someone from Sudan (who has survived trauma and has been living in a refugee camp) and someone who

has been living in the U.S. all his or her life.

In the film, the boys are taken to an apartment, told that their rent will be paid for four months "while they get on their feet," and seemingly, expected to fend for themselves without much guidance at all.

The documentary is a study in the contrasts between Americans and the Africans. Americans exhibit a very sheltered and ignorant view of the world. The Africans quickly learn that they are different—not only from the white Americans but from the black Americans too. Their skin is darker, their culture is different.

As well-meaning as the YMCA and the others involved in the resettlement project were, they failed (miserably in my opinion) to consider how to properly communicate with the Lost Boys. Good communication bridges differences. Bad communication forms barriers.

Tainted with cultural blindness, the Americans did not so much as consider how hard it would be to adjust to American society, or really, what it takes to navigate day-to-day interactions. The boys had never had jobs or earned money or paid rent or dealt with car insurance. And yet, they were left to deal with everything by themselves.

What is worse is that the boys came to America expecting to get an education. In the film, it seems their sponsors thought they should be grateful to get low skilled, low paying jobs.

Because expectations were not properly communicated and because the Americans did not take into consideration the needs of the Lost Boys, the film documents a story of struggle and disaffection rather than of triumph and happiness. As hard as their lives were in Africa, it is not easier for them in the United States.

To me, this documentary illustrates perfectly how

communication will fail if you don't consider your audience and its needs. Even the first decision of what language to use to communicate is a poor one. Communicating in English to people who barely speak the language is a recipe for failure.

Are you considering your audience when you communicate? Or are you so focused on your message you are not checking to see if it is being received?