



Help, I need somebody, help, not just anybody help ... “Offering help” and “Accepting help” in the global context

As in communication, which needs a sender and receiver in order to be successful, “Helping” also always needs at least two parties.

One person who offers help and one person who accepts help. What sounds so simple ever so often goes wrong in the interpersonal and global context. The way an individual helps and also how, and if at all, help is accepted depends on multiple factors, which might vary drastically from culture to culture.

When offering help, one always takes the risk of labelling the potential recipient as needy. Also, when asking for help one needs to bring one's self to do so, does this mean I am abasing myself, when asking for help? To help and to accept help is deeply linked to the field of honour and pride. And as always when it comes to honour and pride we are „captured“ in century-long established behavioural-patterns and –expectations.

The message „I can help you“ always carries a judgement and superiority. Even if the sender of this message doesn't have the intention to show this, the recipient can easily feel himself in the role of an underdog. Because of this, even authentically meant offerings of help can

backfire in the opposite direction of the well-meant intention.

In this context we witnessed an [éclat](#) during the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, between the then serving Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the founder of the world's 3rd largest PC manufacturer Dell Inc., Michael Dell. Dell asked Putin during a panel discussion, how he (Dell/the IT sector) could help him (Putin/Russia). In this [video](#) (at minute 58:15 Michael Dell asks and Putin answers).

Putin answers, that old people and developing countries require help, but not his country.

The IT-entrepreneur with Ukrainian roots Max LEVCHIN, co-founder of Paypal and SLIDE, plausibly explains the „[critical incident](#)“ (at minute 1:00 - 1:14): „The notion of offering help in the English language is less insulting than in Russian and in the Russian-American cultural context. He summarizes the situation as a cross-cultural clash, although he thinks that Michael Dell meant well. There are some similarities between Asian countries and Russia in terms of „saving face“.

Even if Putin would benefit from the offered help, he would – given his cultural imprint – prefer to refuse the offer, since the fact, that he - as a proud Russian Prime Minister - would lose face would cause more damage, than the offer would bring good. One often speaks of “the Russian pride”, which of course is a generalisation and a stereotype. If you put yourself into the same situation, and you ask yourself about your feeling of pride, you can understand his reaction. We are looking at a Russian-American example, yes, but the cultural factor is not the only explanation of the éclat.

A big portion plays the general cross-cultural pride, that we all carry, independent of our national culture.

Another example that help doesn't mean help is the critical reaction regarding the [KONY 2012-Video](#) from the [Invisible Children](#) organisation from [Jason Russell](#). The video itself, as well as the campaign, have the goal to find and arrest the Ugandan leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) Joseph Kony. The video has been clicked more than 65 Million times on Youtube within the first six days of its publication in early March – not always with positive reactions.

[Dr. Joana Breidenbach](#) from [betterplace lab](#) criticises in her article [„Bitte dreimal hinsehen: KONY 2012“](#) (in German) the colonial perspective on Africa.

„The campaign strengthens an Eurocentric world view, in which the whites are the active heroes, and the blacks the passive victims. The campaign is dominated by white Americans. Not a single African person sits on the board of Invisible Children and the target course of the campaign is also destined to white Americans.“ The campaign did wake us up and raised the awareness of the existence of Joseph Kony, who is wanted by the International Criminal Division in Den Haag since 2005, because of crimes against humanity.

Nevertheless an action like this should open a door – without losing face – for those who could benefit from the help offered, he should feel able to walk through this door without losing pride and without becoming a victim. This isn't really possible because of the “Eurocentric world view”, is how Breidenbach labels it.

Without engaging in a dialogue with people one would like to help, and without a conscious avoidance of a potential subconscious supremacy, one will be closing doors instead of opening them.

It is all about genuine interest, genuine quest for sustainability and about the openness to not rate ones way as the right and only way. This isn't easy, since we assume that if our intention is positive our actions will also be perceived as positive.

Neither Michael Dell nor Jason Russell achieved this ...

When you are in a situation again, in which you want to help, put yourself in the position of the person you wish to help and ask before you do. Each culture, each human being deals differently with help. There are as many ways as there are human beings!

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