



**London  
South Bank  
University**



# LEAVE THE DOOR TO THE UNKNOWN

This case study was written as a part of the Erasmus+ Project Grant ID: 2019-1-UK01-KA203-061672)

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



2019-1-UK01-KA203 061672

## LEAVE THE DOOR TO THE UNKNOWN

Ela could not stop squealing with delight when she opened the mail from URR's Central HR Department that Monday morning. It was about the approval of her rotation to Spain. According to the email, they could arrange a three-year recruitment specialist position for her in Spain. Also, the correspondence stated that this was preliminary information. For all further details about rotation, HR Turkey and HR Spain will communicate between themselves. Now, Ela was excited. They were moving to a new country, Spain, and there was a lot of work. The “to-do list” had already begun to work in her mind.

Ela has been working as a recruitment specialist in URR Turkey for five years. URR is one of the leading insurance companies in Europe, with offices in nine countries (Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and 30 countries worldwide, including Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore. She believed that this rotation would be an excellent opportunity for her to step outside of her comfort zone, meet new people in a new culture, and gain HR experience in a different setting. Gaye, the head of Turkey's HR department whom she directly reports to, was also there to support her. Gaye believed Ela was the ideal talent for URR. Her authoritarian personality has potent skills such as organising, a well-categorised mind, and result orientation. However, she also realised that her strong skills sometimes turn out to be one of the improvement potentials. For example, she generally prefers familiar over unfamiliar to be sure or rejects unusual. Also, she admitted to being a black and white thinker during one of their performance evaluation meetings. Anyway, even though she was losing a trained staff, she was happy that Ela would find a chance to be out of her comfort zone for a while and develop her intercultural skills.

No one knows much about the process because Ela was the first Turkish to land a position like this in Europe. Gaye sent an email to Isabelle, the contact HR colleague in Spain, the next day (Tuesday), requesting the schedule and procedure to be followed. Spain responded quickly, stating that the approval process had begun on their end and would be completed in a few weeks. The email concluded with a heartfelt statement about how excited they are to have Ela join their team as soon as possible.



## ***After 2 months... Ela and Gaye were talking...***

### **Ela:**

*“ You see how they are dragging their feet. We have been waiting for 2 months for the 2-week approval process. What drives me crazy is not knowing how long to wait for more. I arranged everything. We packed all the things to take with us, moved from home to my mom's... and now we are homeless. I could not even initiate visa procedures as there is no official acceptance document. Isabella doesn't even need to explain to us. They are too relaxed. Yesterday I wrote to her again and explained my situation, however I got the same out-of-office email.*

### **Gaye:**

*“I understand it's a difficult situation, but maybe you've been too hasty. I don't think Isabella was on the initiative. She has started the necessary process and is just waiting like us. In her last mail, she wrote that she does her best to speed up the process. We rushed them too much. You send dozens of emails asking the same questions she doesn't know the answer to. If you noticed, the returned mails also started to get a little rough. It is useless. In a few months, you'll be office buddies with these people. Ela, please calm down and enjoy your last days spent here.*

### **Ela:**

*Are you kidding? I can neither go nor stay. I can't focus on anything now. I am not sure that I want to go there anymore and work with these people. I am thinking of writing a last email also including country managers. If it doesn't work, then I will withdraw my request for rotation.*

Gaye understood that it was impossible to calm her down. She thought that how a very simple procedure has turned into a subject that they are cc'ing to their managers. Ela's anxiety about uncertainty prevented her from evaluating events objectively and seeking appropriate solutions. With anxiety and prejudice combined, Ela was moving further from reality and getting more and more angry at people. Now she wanted Ela to go to Spain more than before. She should go to Spain. Because what she needs is to leave the door to the unknown.

## **Questions**

*What is the main problem in the case?*

*What kind of person is Ela? How does she cope with ambiguity and stress?*



*What would you do if you were Ela?*

*What would you do if you were Gaye?*

*Do you think that the tolerance ability to ambiguity is an essential cross-cultural skill? How could one improve this skill?*

*What could be the antecedents and consequences of the intolerance of ambiguity in your life or work experience in a cross cultural context?*

### **Recommended Reading**

Furnham, A., & Ribchester, T. (1995). Tolerance of ambiguity: A review of the concept, its measurement and applications. *Current Psychology*, 14(3), 179-199.

Block, J., & Block, J. (1951). An investigation of the relationship between intolerance of ambiguity and ethnocentrism. *Journal of Personality*.

Vives, M. L., & Feldmanhall, O.(2018). Tolerance to ambiguous uncertainty predicts prosocial behavior. *Nature Communications*, 9(1), 2156.



# LEAVE THE DOOR TO THE UNKNOWN – TEACHING GUIDE

## 1. Synopsis

Ela was a recruitment specialist working in URR Turkey and caught a great chance for a rotation to Spain for three years. Although she was very excited and started the preparations immediately to move to Spain, the process was very slow on the Spanish side. The official approval was delayed for 2 months. At this time, she could not get enough information about the process and time planning. This uncertain process created anxiety for Ela and led to increasing tension between the two sides. Although her manager tried to control the process and calm her down, she did not succeed. This very simple procedure has turned into a subject that they are cc'ing (copying) to their managers.

## 2. Teaching Strategy and Teaching Objectives

Students /learners will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what is “tolerate ambiguity” in a cross-cultural context.
- ✓ What could be the consequences of intolerance to ambiguity.

## 3. Target Audience

- ✓ Undergraduate students in all business-related disciplines
- ✓ Postgraduate students in all business-related disciplines

## 4. Questions & Answers for Case Analysis and Teaching

### ✓ Open the discussion

*What is the main problem in the case?*

### ✓ Advance the discussion

*What kind of person is Ela? How does she cope with ambiguity and stress?*

*Do you think that the tolerance ability to ambiguity is an essential cross-cultural skill?*

*What would you do if you were Ela?*

*What would you do if you were Gaye?*

### ✓ Close the discussion

*What could be the antecedence and consequences of the intolerance of ambiguity in your life or work experience in a cross-cultural context?*

*How could one improve this skill?*



## 5. Recommended Reading

Furnham, A., & Ribchester, T. (1995). Tolerance of ambiguity: A review of the concept, its measurement and applications. *Current psychology*, 14(3), 179-199.

Block, J., & Block, J. (1951). An investigation of the relationship between intolerance of ambiguity and ethnocentrism. *Journal of Personality*.

Vives, M. L., & Feldmanhall, O.(2018). Tolerance to ambiguous uncertainty predicts prosocial behavior. *Nature Communications*, 9 (1), 2156.



## LEAVE THE DOOR TO THE UNKNOWN – TEACHING NOTES

### 1. Summary of case study

Ela was a recruitment specialist working in URR Turkey and caught a great chance for a rotation to Spain for three years. Although she was very excited and started the preparations immediately to move to Spain, the process was very slow on the Spanish side. The official approval was delayed for 2 months. At this time, she could not get enough information about the process and time planning. This uncertain process created anxiety for Ela and led to increasing tension between the two sides. Although her manager tried to control the process and calm her down, she did not succeed. This very simple procedure had turned into a subject that they are cc'ing (copying) to their managers.

### 2. Suggested methodology for 'solving' case study

#### ✓ Open the discussion

The discussion can be started with asking,

*What is the main problem in the case?*

#### ✓ Advance the discussion

The discussion can be deepened by following questions.

*What kind of person is Ela? How does she cope with ambiguity and stress?*

*Do you think that the tolerance ability to ambiguity is an essential cross-cultural skill?*

By these questions, participants can focus on the ambiguity concept. The intolerance /tolerance to ambiguity can be defined by explaining Ela's character traits and behaviours. As a result of Ela's intolerance to ambiguity, it can be emphasized how a simple issue can turn out to be a big topic and affects Ela's career negatively, and caused communication problems with her Spanish colleagues. With this awareness, the importance of the “ability to tolerate ambiguity” as an essential cross-cultural skill can be discussed. Then, participants can be encouraged to find their own solutions to the case problem, by asking the following questions.

*What would you do if you were Ela?*

*What would you do if you were Gaye?*

#### ✓ Close the discussion (15 min)

At the end of the discussion, participants can be invited to think about their selves and they may be asked to generate ideas to develop/improve their tolerance ability to ambiguity?

*What could be the antecedence and consequences of the intolerance of ambiguity in your life or work experience in a cross-cultural context?*



*How could one improve this skill?*

### 3. Possible answers

The main problem highlighted in the case is that Ela could not tolerate the uncertainty she faced during the rotation process and she made the process and her career even more difficult. Ela is a highly successful high-potential employee and generally gets recognition from her manager. Her manager assesses her potential as:

*“Her **authoritarian personality** has potent skills such as organising, a well-categorised mind, and result orientation. However, she also realised that her strong skills sometimes turn out to be one of the improvement potentials. For example, she **generally prefers familiar over unfamiliar to be sure or rejects unusual**. Also, she admitted to being a **black and white thinker** during one of the performance evaluation meetings.”*

Such people with these traits may have more tendency to perceive (i.e. interpret) ambiguous situations as sources of threat. As in the case of Ela, she interpreted such a delayed procedure as a deliberate obstacle from her Spanish colleagues. She engaged in a fight that didn't exist.

*“You see how they are dragging their feet. We have been waiting for 2 months for the 2-week approval process. What drives me crazy is not knowing how long to wait for more..... I am not sure that I want to go there anymore and work with these people. I am thinking of writing a last email also including country managers. If it doesn't work, then I will withdraw my request for rotation.*

Budner (1962) defines ambiguity intolerance as "the tendency to perceive...ambiguous situations as sources of threat", the tendency to reject items that are contradictory or slightly incongruent with their existing system. The one who is intolerant of ambiguity avoid or give up when encountering ambiguous situations. Similarly, in the case, Ela decides to withdraw from the rotation process because she could not receive information for a while. Since ambiguous situations are sources of conflict and anxiety, she got very angry with her Spanish colleagues.

*“I am not sure that I want to go there anymore and work with these people. I am thinking of writing a last email also including country managers. If it doesn't work, then I will withdraw my request for rotation.”*

However, people who are tolerant of ambiguity are willing to take risks and open to change, show endurance on tasks and higher levels of achievement, and not be cognitively or affectively disturbed by uncertainty. Cross cultural contexts are environments where the level of uncertainty is high. Thus, to perform well in this complex and uncertain cross cultural situations, the tolerance ability to ambiguity is an essential cross-cultural skill.





If Ela had tolerance ability to ambiguity, she could evaluate this situation objectively and understand that the reason for the delay may be systemic or cultural. When Ela detected the problem correctly, she could focus on her current work by giving the other party enough time instead of sending annoying e-mails. If she could stop controlling everything so tightly to make things clear, she could trust the flow of life and enjoy the process more.

Gaye (Ela's manager) was aware of Ela's wrong attitude, however she also struggled with this situation. Since she couldn't convince Ela, she seemed to be in the position of the manager who cannot solve a small problem and escalates the issue to a higher manager. Gaye might suggest some training or therapy to Gaye in order to improve her tolerance to ambiguity and she could lead this process herself until Ela was relaxed.

Developing a tolerance for ambiguity is a powerful cross cultural skill to have. Not only will it help to reduce one's anxiety and worry, you'll feel more confident that you can handle all types of situations.

There may be several suggested ways to develop this ability. One of them could be ***“comfort zone/stretch zone/panic zone model”*** and it can be introduced here to participants.

According to this model, the centre of the circle is where we feel comfortable and safe, and we are not learning here. The stretch zone is the zone where there is a possibility for growth and development but it is a place of exploration that we can venture into and yet not a place of extreme discomfort or where we feel unsafe. The panic zone, on the other hand, is the zone where we are in extreme stress and are likely having the “fight or flight” response. We are not being comfortable or feeling safe, and we are most likely not really learning either because the brain is not calm enough to think objectively or to process new information.

When we relate this model to ambiguity and change, we can see the stretch zone as the “ambiguity and uncertainty zone”, the best level to be out of the comfort zone and learn new things. However, everyone has different endings and beginnings for each zone.

For further information, the article which enhances the ability of the trainer to prepare participants for, and support them through, the ambiguity and uncertainty can be visited using the below link.

<https://www.trainerslibrary.org/how-to-develop-tolerance-to-ambiguity-and-change/>



