

WORKING CULTURES

THE INTELLIGENT
WAY TO DEAL
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Are business leaders prepared to deal with the range of perspectives, origins and experiences of their future employees? Are we geared up to deal with diversity?

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CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

In order to work with a wide range of people, leaders need to develop cultural intelligence, that is to say, the ability to understand others, to make them understand and to find a way of working together with people from different cultures.

As an illustration, take the following two examples.

Luis was born near Barcelona and graduated top of his engineering class. After doing his military service he began working in the field of renewable energy. After working for a time in North Africa, some colleagues told him that an Algerian had come to Barcelona with a proposed project. The Algerian was working for Aenor, the competition, and his colleagues encouraged Luis to bring him on board. Luis was able to make himself understood by the Algerian. "Finally, we made the offer. We should have made it in French, but we did it in English. The papers had to be in by a certain date, but they weren't. But in the end we won the tender, which was worth several hundred thousand euros. It was for a hybrid generation plant with a combined cycle. I was super-motivated because I was learning French as the Algerian and I had become friends.

"A lot was based on the relationship and the way Muslims do things. Mustaf is an Algerian civil servant who began setting up some small businesses. He had a lot of experience, but not as



a lawyer or an engineer, and I had to help him a lot to get things done.” Despite the cultural differences between Luis and Mustaf, Luis was able to work effectively with his counterpart in Algeria.

On the other hand, Nancy, who was born in New Jersey, moved to Madrid at the age of 30 when she got married and took a job in a Spanish bank. For years she arrived at work in her running shoes and then changed into her

high heels, whereupon she worked intensively until 6 p.m., when she again changed her shoes and went home as fast as possible. After she had been there for three years she was upset to discover that she had been passed over for promotion. It was then that she found out that her colleagues viewed her as an individualistic person. She learned that some of her habits, such as eating her lunch at her keyboard, were the source of both amusement and irritation. They laughed at her for being obsessed with work and annoyed that she never wanted to spend any time socializing with the others. They were also annoyed by the smell of her lunch wafting through the office.

The examples of Luis and Nancy illustrate how cultural intelligence, or the lack of it, can affect both the projects you are engaged in as well as your personal and professional career. Luis, in his dealings with Mustaf, was able to grasp and understand that he was influenced by several cultures, that he was a Muslim from Algeria, a civil servant and not an engineer. Nancy, however, learned the hard way that she should to decode the cultural norms and adjust her behavior so as to integrate better into local culture if she wanted to be considered for promotion.

As labor forces become ever more diverse, we have no option but to develop cultural intelligence among our employees and for ourselves. Measuring the appropriateness of our decisions depends on what we consider to be acceptable and effective. These premises do not derive only from our nationality. Different generations also have different values, because they have undergone different experiences from the generations before and after. The socialization of a professional group also involves the development of a series of assumptions and these are

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DEVELOPING CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE HELPS US TO BE MORE CONSCIOUS OF OTHER PEOPLE'S VALUE SYSTEMS.

affected by variables, among them, the religion people belong to, the companies where they have worked and also their families.

Each culture has its own internal logic. In our socialization we have learned to prioritize some aspects of work over others. We have come to understand that there are some socially acceptable ways of behaving and others that are not. We have not asked why but have accepted that that's the way it is. The Chinese, for example, tend to be collectivist, while Americans tend to be individualist.

A person's cultural identity does not develop in isolation. You are not only Spanish, or a lawyer or a member of a family. You can be all of these things, and others, at the same time. In this context, assumptions will interact in different ways according to the person and the situation.

Developing cultural intelligence helps us to be more conscious of other people's value systems and ways of thinking, as well as reaching a better understanding of our own beliefs. They motivate us and help us to be effective in unfamiliar situations, and aid us in developing a repertory of behaviors from which we can choose the most appropriate, depending on the context. For a leader living and working in culturally diverse systems, this intelligence is indispensable.

WHAT IS CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE?

● ● **There are three dimensions to cultural intelligence.** The first is the cognitive aspect, which embraces not only knowledge of the customs of different cultures but also the ability to understand the basis on which assumptions are made. This requires a high level of self-knowledge, self-examination and empathy.

The second dimension is motivation, that is to say, the internal engine that drives us to initiate, develop and persist in having multicultural encounters.

Finally there is a dimension of conduct, the capacity to adapt yourself and to behave appropriately in each specific context.

There is no standard model for developing cultural intelligence. However, there are strategies such as coaching programs, seminars and training that can be very helpful and have been shown to be effective. Whatever course of action is adopted, there are three steps that must be followed:

1. ENHANCING DRIVES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS. If someone is not motivated or does not have the confidence to step out of their comfort zone, they may simply avoid it and fail to mobilize the necessary capabilities and resources to confront the challenges of culture. Setting clear goals in learning and visualizing potential (career and personal) benefits in cross-cultural encounters can help individuals to be motivated.

2. DEVELOPING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND STRATEGIC THINKING. Specific knowledge of different cultures is indispensable. The second step to developing cultural intelligence involves developing knowledge about cultural differences. More importantly, in order to deal with the overwhelming cultural diversity in the world, people need to develop the capability to *monitor, analyze and plan* behaviors in cross-cultural settings. Withhold your judgment and show respect.

3. EXPANDING BEHAVIORAL REPERTOIRE. Adaptation often means acting in ways different from what we are used to doing naturally. Deviating from such natural style requires training and practice. For example, we may need to adopt a less direct communication style in some cultures. Also, the need to show respect in interacting with colleagues and supervisors may vary considerably.

Finally, this learning is not a linear process. Sometimes we feel we are making great progress, sometimes we feel that we fall back and perform poorly in some domains in cross-cultural encounters. The important thing is to persist in this process. Identify some approaches that work well for you personally, find a mentor or coach who can give you advice on the journey and continue to develop it. You should soon see the results.

AUTHORS' NOTE

The names and places have been changed to protect the identity of the people mentioned in this article.