

Ways to raise your cultural intelligence

Are future leaders ready to take on the diversity they will face in their careers? To deal with varying perspectives, leaders need cultural intelligence.

June 29, 2010

Today's leaders have a challenge to get things done in a complex and diverse workplace. To be truly effective, they need to cultivate "cultural intelligence," say [Mireia las Heras](#) (IESE), Laura Santana and Jina Mao in "Developing Leaders With Cultural Intelligence: Exploring the Cultural Dimension of Leadership," a chapter in the book *Extraordinary Leadership: Addressing the Gaps in Senior Executive Development*.

Cultural intelligence refers to the ability to stand outside one's own beliefs and examine them. This becomes even more important as leadership styles become increasingly collective.

The need to manage culturally different groups has increased over the past two decades, owing to dramatic changes in the workplace. There has been an influx of highly educated women and immigrants. The new generation entering the workforce has values that are very different from those of previous generations: they believe in more time with the family, a better environment and social justice. Globalization of businesses implies work across boundaries, even when people do not travel, and often involves working for clients in other regions.

Be aware of invisible assumptions

People from different backgrounds bring different values to work. Leaders need to be aware that culture is rooted in basic assumptions that are often taken for granted. Understanding these assumptions is crucial when leaders collaborate with people who hold views different

from their own.

A simple example: the word "deadline" means "an agreed due date" in the United States, but "within an estimated period" in Latin America. Such nuances pose a challenge for leaders who deal with diverse groups, be they geographically dispersed teams or managing operations in different countries.

The need for global leaders who can effectively manage across cultures, along with a shortage of people capable of doing this, is a challenge facing most companies undertaking globalization strategies.

The authors suggest some strategic tools that organizations could apply for development and leadership effectiveness: cultural awareness training and border crossing.

Intercultural training programs

Cultural awareness training can be helpful. Leaders can gain knowledge about culturally appropriate behavior through language training, books and personal coaching, for example. But developing leaders who can truly adapt across different cultures requires additional steps.

One technique is the "cultural assimilator," an activity that provides participants with "critical incidents" across cultures — for example, an American visitor meets with a local resident in a foreign country. Each episode is followed by a question and several alternative interpretations of the local person's behavior. Trainees choose one interpretation and then receive feedback. Each critical incident has been developed to highlight unique cultural concepts. The ultimate purpose of such an exercise is to train participants to make responses and interpretations similar to those of people from the target culture.

Nothing beats experience

Although such activities provide a basis for cultural understanding, it takes more to truly broaden a person's mindset and gain cultural awareness. This is where experience-based programs come in. Here, participants from the same or different countries meet and have exposure to different yet equally valuable perspectives from various worldviews. They share stories, best practices and challenges.

Experience-based programs highlight the important difference between learning and development, or developmental stretch. It is one thing to learn about differences, and quite

another to actually cultivate behaviors that at the very least acknowledge, or even better, value different personality styles or worldviews, so that people come to appreciate differences and consider alternative views.

To this end, running an explicit consciousness-raising program can help people gain self-awareness by exposing them to a variety of people and views different from their own. For example, volunteering for NGOs, such as those working with homeless people, or engaging in team-building adventure sports, such as mountain climbing, are some ways that can serve to broaden minds.

The self-assessment tests used to train expatriates can also be used to help every employee develop his or her own capacity to adapt to different cultural values. Though certain traits, like being trustworthy and encouraging, are better indicators of cultural intelligence, even those who show signs of being loners or less cooperative are able to find ways to improve themselves, and companies can tailor training programs accordingly.

Companies should also try to leverage personal backgrounds. Research shows that individuals who have had earlier life experiences moving across borders, and who have learned the value of difference and accommodation, often have more successful expatriate assignments. This is something to consider even for those employees who don't move from their own countries but who will invariably have to do business cross-culturally due to the nature of today's globalized business world. Some MNCs routinely transfer professional and managerial staff to other countries, precisely to develop skills at working across cultures, and this is something else to consider.

Focus on similarities, not differences

Cultural intelligence must be included in a company's leadership development strategy, say the authors. Managers who cross borders say that learning different procedures, listening to others and watching how other people interact does help them to be more effective.

Although living and working with people who hold assumptions different from one's own can be a powerful motor that increases self-awareness, this is not always the case. Take the classic example of expatriates who focus mostly on differences and refuse to learn from a new culture, interacting only with those from their home culture.

It goes without saying that the individuals, teams and companies who build on similarities and resist focusing on differences between people will be the winners at managing today's

interdependent and multicultural world.

www.iese.edu/insight