

3 Ways to Improve Your Cultural Intelligence

by Louise Rasmussen - August 12, 2014

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Picture this - you're introduced to the CEO of a French start-up that your company is in the process of acquiring.

The CEO grabs your hand and leans in for some repeated lip action on your cheeks. His breath has a hint of garlic and something else you can't identify.

His grip on your hand is lasting so long you start worrying that he might propose.

Will you recoil?

Will your facial expressions give away how you really feel?

Your cultural intelligence, or lack of same, could make or break your next big professional venture.

It doesn't matter whether you're actually going on an overseas excursion or staying put. Most any professional settings these days require you to [work with people who have a different cultural background](#) than you. You will have to be able to interpret what culturally different people are doing and why, so that you can figure out how to respond.

If you have high cultural intelligence, then you can do that no matter where the people you're interacting with are from. Fortunately, just as [you can change your general intelligence](#), you can also develop cultural intelligence.

Getting to the (Head, Body, and) Heart of Cultural Intelligence

Christopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski from Purdue University have spent their careers studying business executives and managers who work overseas. They have noticed that some professionals are better at working with people from other cultures than others. They attribute this to high cultural intelligence.

You may have heard about social intelligence. A person with high social intelligence can get along and work well with others. We sometimes say they have people skills. Cultural intelligence is like that. Only it implies that a person is able to get along with other people no matter what their cultural background.

That's because a person who has cultural intelligence is able to interpret and even imitate gestures and styles of communicating that seem unfamiliar to them at first.

Earley and Mosakowski published [an article](#) in the Harvard Business Review that gives practical advice about how to improve cultural intelligence. They suggest that cultural intelligence has three parts: a head,

a body, and a heart.

Let's look at the three areas and how you might go about improving in each of them.

1. Devise Learning Strategies to find Entry Points into to the New Culture

You can't know everything about a new culture before you enter it. This means you have to learn. To do that, you have to first figure out where to start. Going into a new culture can be overwhelming at first. You have to find your way in.

Earley advises that to find a point of entry into a new culture you should be on the lookout for clues to the culture's shared understanding.

If you find yourself puzzled or surprised about something members of the culture say or do, that can be an entry point to the culture. The fact that you don't immediately understand what's going on is a sign that they may have a different shared understanding than you. This can be a good point to ask questions or otherwise get more information.

In our article on [cross-cultural competence](#) we describe some specific ways to handle surprises and give more strategies for learning about new cultures. A little background in [world history](#) doesn't hurt.

Earley suggests that a good way to improve your ability to reason about culture and develop your cultural intelligence might be to read case studies and spend some time thinking about the common threads. Craig Storti's collection of [intercultural conversations](#) or Ken Cushner's [stories about interactions between Americans and foreigners](#) are good places to start.

2. Show that You Accept People from the Other Culture

Telling people that you understand them isn't enough. You have to show that you accept them.

Earley and Mosakowski suggest that the best way to do that is through your actions; in other words, by using your body. More specifically, moving your body in the same way members of the other culture do.

If you imitate the gestures and mannerisms used by the members of another culture it shows that you think highly enough of them to want to be like them.

Moving like they do is a simple way to establish the kind of bond you need to have to accomplish something with the other person. This doesn't have to mean that you want to be like them in every way or that you endorse everything the culture stands for. [You don't have to truly become them](#), but you do have to appear genuine in acting like them.

If you're not confident that you'd be able to pull this off you might attend an acting class or two to help you feel more comfortable.

3. Believe in Your Ability to Adapt to the Culture

Even when things aren't going as you expected in the new culture and you're starting to get frustrated, you need to have confidence in your ability to figure it out. Your heart has to be in it.

As the old saying goes, when the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Having and growing cultural intelligence, Earley and Mosakowski suggest, requires that you don't become discouraged when you're challenged. It will sometimes be tempting to say to yourself "These people just don't make sense!" When that happens, you have to remember that they do make sense to each other.

It will also help to remember past experiences you have had where you were able to figure something out or interact successfully. Of course, that becomes easier the more past experiences you have had.

Earley suggests that a good way to start increasing your confidence is to come up with a few simple tasks to complete when you first encounter the new culture. This could be going to buy a newspaper, asking for directions, or greeting someone. Once you have had some smaller wins and master simple activities you will feel better prepared for more challenging situations.

Look Back to Get Ahead

Perhaps the most important ingredient to improving in all three areas of cultural intelligence is to stay aware of how well (or not) you are doing.

Each time you have an experience or encounter with someone from another culture, reflect on what happened. Evaluate how well you did. You might ask a friend, a colleague, or even another member of the other culture. It's important to find someone you trust. This may mean looking for answers in more than one place.

Finally, don't be discouraged if you feel that you're not even particularly good at interacting with people from your own culture. If that's the case, Earley and Mosakowski think you may even have an advantage adapting to different cultures. It means you are more used to doing the work it takes to fit in.

Earley PC, & Mosakowski E (2004). Cultural intelligence. *Harvard business review*, 82 (10), 139-146
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