Cultural Competence: What, Why, and How

by Winston Sieck - October 20, 2017

https://www.globalcognition.org/cultural-competence/

Building relationships and working successfully with different others can seem like a major challenge.

But you can enjoy the rewards, while keeping frustration to a minimum.

The key to making them work is cultural competence.

What is cultural competence?

Cultural competence is defined as the ability to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural competence is comprised of four components or aspects:

- a diplomatic mindset,
- agile cultural learning,
- reasoning about other cultures, and
- a disciplined approach to intercultural interactions.

We go through each of these competency areas in more depth, below. Essentially, cultural competence is a set of skills and knowledge that can help you learn, reason, solve problems, and interact comfortably when you're working with people from different cultures. Cultural competence can be improved through training, education, and experience.

In our increasingly connected world, it's not surprising that we are encountering people from all manner of backgrounds in our workplaces. Whether you are leading a diverse team to develop a new product, treating patients from different walks of life, promoting stability in a conflict zone, or teaching in a multicultural classroom, cultural competence is critical to your success in the professional realm.

Why improve your cultural competence?

Cultural competence can help you do your job more effectively. What does that mean in practice?

Cross-cultural teamwork has many benefits. But, working in a culturally diverse environment sometimes comes with differences of opinion and tension.

Cultural competence can allow you to detect problems early and prevent knee-jerk reactions is situations that initially seem puzzling or even provoking. This allows you to connect and build mutual trust with the people you work with. These relationships can provide fresh insights and innovative solutions to problems. They can even give you the inside scoop on others in your environment who don't support your agenda.

Relating better to people you work with, so you can get things done. That's a realistic objective with obvious benefits.

What are the essential cultural competencies for work?

To address this question, Louise Rasmussen and Winston Sieck of Global Cognition studied professionals with extensive experience working across cultural boundaries. Their paper, "Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures," was published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

One of the unique features of their research was that participants were required to have a wide range of cultural experiences to be included in the studies. It was not enough to be deeply immersed in one foreign culture. This enabled the research team to tease out general cross-cultural skills that apply when working with someone from any group.

In addition, in contrast to previous work, the team did not ask these seasoned professionals for their opinions about cultural competence. Instead, the researchers dug into their lived experiences using cognitive task analysis to uncover the skills they used to meet their most challenging interactions.

The researchers identified four broad cultural competency domains that the experts used to create successful cross-cultural relationships.

Diplomatic Mindset

Diplomacy is the art of dealing with people in a thoughtful and effective way. Though it's often talked about in connection with international relationships, diplomacy and tact can be applied to every interaction we have with people from other cultures or social backgrounds.

A diplomatic mindset starts with a focus on what you are trying to accomplish. And recognizing that you need to work with diverse others to meet your goals. It means being aware of your own worldview and realizing that your own background shapes how you see things.

Doing so helps you understand how you are viewed by the person you are interacting with. It also helps you manage your own attitudes toward the other person's culture. Making it easier to find ways to get the job done despite your differences.

Cultural Learning

Professionals who successfully navigate cross-cultural relationships actively learn cultural norms, language and customs in an ongoing fashion. There's far too much to know about peoples and cultures to think that you can read a book or take a class and be done with it.

Rasmussen and Sieck found that cross-cultural experts deliberately seek out the experiences and relationships that will advance their cultural understanding rather than remaining fixed in their own narrow experience.

They were also sensitive to the limits and biases of their guides. Hence, they'd consult and check a variety of sources such as web sites, books (even fiction), local informants, and colleagues to get a full understanding of the range of views within a culture.

Cultural learning does not only take place in preparation for an interaction, it continues afterward as well. The professionals would often seek feedback from natives of their host country after an experience to find out what they got wrong and what they could do better in the future.

Cultural Reasoning

Cultural reasoning helps you make sense of cultural behaviors that initially seem odd. Like a scientist with an unexpected result, treat puzzling behaviors as opportunities to deepen your understanding of the culture. Dig in and figure out why they do what they do.

If you're walking into a situation completely fresh, with no context to draw from, all is not lost. Taking a moment to reflect on the 'why' likely leads you to discover a few possible alternatives.

Maybe she was trying to get a read on your personal values to gauge how we'll you'll work together. Or, maybe he was trying to get a rise out of you, to get a sense of how well you manage conflict.

It may not be possible to figure out a person's real motivation is in the moment. But, with practice, you'll find that you can regularly take the point of view of diverse people you're working with. You can more readily consider their beliefs and desires in the moment and use that perspective to work together more effectively.

Once you discover people's beliefs and motives, you're in a better position to spot the differences that cause misunderstandings and conflict. And, you have your hands on the levers to influence their perceptions and decisions if you need to.

Intercultural Interaction

Showing you've taken the time to learn a custom or bit of language goes a long way to build rapport with someone from a different culture. Yet, it's natural to feel awkward and uncertain, or even silly, and so avoid giving it a try.

Fortunately, there is a natural tendency for people to positively respond to someone's attempts to address language and cultural norms, regardless of their performance level.

For example, using a customary greeting in a person's native tongue will be seen positively even if it hits the limit of your language skills.

The connection begins in the attempt. Mastery happens over time.

One trick the seasoned professionals use is to plan their critical intercultural communications in advance. This goes beyond rehearsing that greeting to getting your nuanced talking points down before a difficult negotiation.

No matter how much you've planned, sometimes interactions go poorly. People from other cultures sometimes want fundamentally different things than you. And, as is the case within any group of people, sometimes they really are just rude.

Cross-cultural experts draw on deep reserves of discipline to face these situations. They manage their reactions and the impression they make, which often earns them greater respect in the process.

How to cultivate cultural competence within your team or organization

You might be able to influence the cultural competence of others within your team or organization. Here are four ways you can get started:

Make cultural competence part of your team or organization's narrative

To do that, include cultural competence in your policies, mission or vision statements, project plans, and other resources or documents that define your expectations for your people.

Be sure to get buy-in from key stakeholders and influencers within your team or organization. They are the ones who will take your vision from paper and to practice.

Recognize and reward instances of cultural competence. Even if it's just with positive attention.

Deliberately foster dialogue with and between teammates or subordinates around cultural issues

To get the conversation started, you can share this article. You might organize discussions of cultural issues or experiences around the following activities:

- Get people to report on cultural surprises that occur within the context of your work.
- Discuss them as a group.
- Try to take the cultural other's perspective.
- Come up with some alternative hypotheses about the beliefs and motivations behind the behaviors.
- Locate cultural mentors inside or outside your team or organization and ask them questions.
- Compare their answers.

Discussions like this can help you set or define a positive vision. Seeing examples of outcomes of handling intercultural interactions wisely will motivate your people to improve their cultural competence.

Provide cultural competence instruction and other professional development

Incorporating a cross-cultural training program can be a reasonable option, if it's done well. Do you have someone who develops or delivers cultural competence or diversity instruction within your team or organization? Or, are you evaluating existing options on the market?

In either case, be sure the folks who develop the content you use:

- Understand what cultural competence is.
- Promote the specific cultural skills and knowledge that are important for your people to learn.
- Give examples of how cultural competence will change and improve the ways your people do their jobs.

When you talk to instruction developers or vendors, you can use the competencies in this article as a starting point for describing the positive behaviors you expect within your team or organization.

Set realistic objectives for the change you want to see.

It's important to keep in mind that developing cultural competence is not a one-shot enterprise. It takes time and practice. No single book, article, workshop, course, or even immersion is going to get the job done.

Use the information in this article to define a specific and realistic vision for the changes you want to see within your team or organization. And, make a plan for how you will sustain and advance your people's cultural competence.

How to avoid pandering and related pitfalls

When you engage with people from other cultures, it can be tempting to think that you can't be yourself. You might even feel that you need to pretend to be someone who's willing to go along with pretty much anything.

The thing is, people in other cultures are people too. They have likes and dislikes just like you. And, they can sense when you're not being real.

Similarly, studying up on other expressions, customs, and interests is great. But it's important to think carefully about how you use that information.

Picking up others' gestures or attire can sometimes seem like mocking or intruding on another's identity.

There's a fine line between paying respect and pandering. You have to read reactions and adapt to circumstances. Going overboard showing respect can sometimes cause you to lose it.

Instead, be yourself. If you're genuine, people pick up on that and appreciate it.

Regardless of your industry or the type of workplace in which you are employed, cultural competence plays an important role in your daily environment. As a leader or a part of team, recognizing and dealing cultural differences will create a more productive workplace as well as a happier setting for everyone who is there. In today's modern world, cultural competence is a necessity for everyone.

Image Credit: rawpixel

Reference

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