

Cultural Competence for Working Relationships

by Winston Sieck - October 20, 2017

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

The classic television show "Star Trek" was adept at putting the main character "Captain James T Kirk" in situations where he had to fight his way out of misunderstandings with alien life forms and captain a ship with ever. present. dramatic. pauses.

One of the most dramatic elements was the friendship that developed between Kirk and the ever-logical Dr. Spock. What begins as an often combative relationship fraught with cultural misunderstanding evolves into a deep relationship of trust and creative collaboration.

Building relationships 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.

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

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 an expert 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 and uncovered 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 sensitive and effective way. Most often applied to international relationships, diplomacy and tact can be applied to every interaction we may 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 world view, 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 in spite of 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 in order to find out what they got wrong and what they could do better in the future.

Cultural Reasoning

In the midst of phasor battles and "going where no man has gone before," Captain Kirk struggled to bridge his differences in cultures and customs with Mr. Spock. Sometimes he successfully navigated an interaction with his trusted advisor. Other times he was left scratching his head.

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

With practice, you'll find that you can regularly [take the point of view of diverse folks](#) 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.

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.

That means, 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 communications in advance. This goes beyond rehearsing that greeting to getting your nuanced talking points down before a difficult negotiation.

However much you've planned, sometimes interactions go poorly. People from any culture may want fundamentally different things than you. Or even just to get under your skin. The cross-cultural experts draw on deep reserves of discipline to face these situations, often earning greater respect in the process.

The Value of Cultural Competence for Job Performance

Cultural competence isn't just for the intergalactic captain of a star ship. It can be readily applied to every vocation.

Cultural Competence for Business Success

Business professionals in all types of industries know that cultural competence is necessary if they want to succeed in today's global economy. In business, you need to reach beyond simple acceptance and tolerance of differences.

To reach your business goals, you have to strive to include people of different backgrounds and ethnicities on your teams. As well as count them among your customers and suppliers.

This means stepping outside of your comfort zone and experiencing new people, places, flavors and experiences. Constantly seeking ways to improve your [business cultural practices](#).

Doing so can make it a little easier when things get tough.

For example, imagine finding yourself working with a cultural collaborator ahead of an important negotiation. Figuring out how to structure your communication in a way that allows a Columbian business partner to change their mind while saving face.

Educators Can Close the Gap with Cultural Competence

Teachers at all levels of education find their classrooms becoming increasingly diverse. Students from different backgrounds and cultures are filling the desks.

According to the [National Education Association](#), teachers need to recognize their own cultural identity while also remaining aware of the norms and standards associated with the students' cultures.

If a young girl from Syria is hesitant to address a male teacher, cultural competence helps the teacher address the conflict between the child's upbringing and cultural norms in the US without degrading either.

Teachers also need to instill cultural competence in their own students. This starts by creating an atmosphere within the classroom where students feel comfortable sharing their ideas and discussing their differences with one another.

Understanding students' cultural experiences and backgrounds can not only create a space where they feel included, it can also speed the learning process along.

Building Culturally Competent Communities

According to the [American Society for Public Administration](#), about 39 percent of American citizens categorize themselves as racial and ethnic minorities. As community demographics change, government reps have to adjust and continually strive to advocate for all those who are living in their areas.

Culturally competent government agents appreciate the differences of all the folks they serve, as well as create policies and procedures that recognize the diversity in the local culture.

For example, a public administrator might need to plan events that encourage people from different backgrounds and cultures to connect with one another. Such public events help to establish a welcoming atmosphere that lends itself to cultural competence among the people being served by a government.

Facilitating cultural learning in this way can lead to more peaceful coexistence in our diverse neighborhoods, cities and states.

Customizing Health Care and Social Work with Cultural Competence

Whether working in a nursing home, at a hospital or within a school, health care and social workers need to be able to identify differences in others while treating them with sensitivity and compassion.

When caring for patients from different cultures or backgrounds, medical practitioners need to seek to understand their differences in beliefs, practices and desires for medical care. And then to take their perspective into account when formulating recommendations for treatment.

The [National Association of Social Workers](#) notes that cultural competence is particularly important in this field, as social workers are often called to advocate for those on the fringes of society.

Social workers are often responsible for connecting their clients to community resources that can help meet their needs. Culturally-competent social workers need to identify how the backgrounds of their

clients impact their needs. They need to connect their clients with resources that will minimize their stress while maximizing the results achieved.

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](#)

Rasmussen, L. J., & Sieck, W. R. (2015). Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14 (3), 75-90 : [10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.014)

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