

What is Cultural Sensitivity and How Does it Develop?

by Winston Sieck - September 12, 2019

<https://www.globalcognition.org/what-is-cultural-sensitivity/>

As a manager or employee, when you travel to another country for your job, adapting to a new culture can be quite intimidating. The same can be said when you need to collaborate with diverse team members in your own country.

The global business environment is quickly blurring the lines between home and foreign work assignments, but the cultural gaps are often a struggle in either case. Cultural sensitivity helps ease the adjustment.

Cultural sensitivity means that you are aware and accepting of cultural differences. It implies that you withhold judgment of cross-cultural practices, and that you can deal effectively with these differences.

Cultural sensitivity is integral in any cross-cultural relationship. But it is critical in international working relations, such as in business or government jobs. For example, some studies show that workers at all levels are more effective and are more competent at negotiation when they are culturally sensitive.

At a more basic level, understanding the nuances of a culture that are reflected in body language, speech patterns, and customs allow the worker to better understand and communicate with coworkers, business partners, affiliates, and customers.

A handshake, for instance, is acceptable, even expected in western culture. However, in Thailand it is not. Instead, a wai is offered, a bow with the hands palm to palm at chest level and you should return it. You should offer a handshake only if the person does not offer a wai.

While the importance of cultural sensitivity in the workplace is widely recognized, there is not a great deal of research that examines the development and progression of cultural sensitivity.

Jon Shapiro, Julie Ozanne, and Bige Saatcioglu conducted a study that explores stages of development of cultural sensitivity, with an emphasis on their application to business people working overseas. The results apply as well to situations involving employees with diverse backgrounds working together within their home country. Shapiro and colleagues published [their paper](#), “An Interpretive Examination of the Development of Cultural Sensitivity in International Business” in the *Journal of International Business Studies*.

Their investigation turned up four stages of cultural sensitivity development: the romantic sojourner, the foreign worker, the skilled worker, and the partner. The researchers describe these stages in terms of natural development based on experience. Well structured [cross-cultural training](#) could potentially lead to quicker progression along the developmental path.

The Romantic Sojourner: A stranger in a strange land

At this stage of cultural sensitivity, the business professional is a tourist. They are caught up in the romance and adventure of exploring a different culture. They are more a cultural spectator than an actual participant.

They may be excited for the opportunity to experience another culture. What they don't realize is that they are often seeing that culture's "tourist manners" and not really seeing into the depths of the culture all that much.

The romantic sojourner will take part in the local cultural events, such as festivals and parades, but that is typically the extent of their interaction with the members of the host culture. It is the primary interaction with little more. It may look and feel like immersion, but it is very superficial, especially when it comes to the professional working culture.

It is much like a love affair. At first, they are infatuated, riding the waves of a new romance with new experiences. But everyone has on their best manners and they don't really know each other on a deep, personal level. It is all just skimming the surface and they are treating it more like an escape or vacation than a home situation where they are immersed in the culture.

In the romantic sojourner's eyes, everything is glittering and magical. It is not realistic, and it sets them up for some serious disillusionment. They have an idealized view of the culture and are enamored with that, but have not yet become acquainted with the aspects of it that tend to be concealed from outsiders.

The Foreign Worker: The business side of things

The emotional, naïve romantic sojourner eventually gives way to the foreign worker. At this stage of cultural sensitivity, the individual has a more realistic view of the host culture norms. As the immersion develops into something deeper, beyond the shallow infatuation, they get their first real taste of the local [cultural norms](#).

This stage develops when the individual stops being a starry-eyed tourist and engages in the everyday business of their work and living. They observe their environment, both on a professional and personal level, and place themselves in that culture. Then, they begin to see the deeper layers that they didn't or couldn't see as a tourist.

During this stage, the worker starts out as an observer, but, over time, grows and develops into an active participant. They begin to join in the more authentic cultural ceremonies and rituals, adapting to them as a way of life.

The individual's business colleagues who are native to the local culture, begin inviting the foreign worker to participate and attend them. This is one of the benchmarks of the foreign worker's advancement from the romantic sojourner stage.

The more the foreign worker is immersed in the local culture, the more realistic a view they develop of that culture. They develop knowledge of cultural practices that are more sophisticated.

They learn to take part in authentic local social behaviors although at this point it is more about mimicry than true immersion. They may role play or pretend at this stage, but even that is an integral step in the development of cultural sensitivity.

At this point the foreign worker is often hit with the reality that they are, indeed, an outsider. Culture shock and disenchantment may set in, but they also get a more realistic view and attitude. As they are immersed in the business culture, they naturally get deeper into the social culture as well.

The Skilled Worker: The knowledgeable foreigner

Foreign workers who are able to stick it out and make the initial [cultural adjustment](#) develop into skilled workers. When they reach this cultural sensitivity stage, they have attained a much deeper understanding of the host culture. They also have more cultivated interactions with their business associates.

The attitude has changed and instead of just trying to be diplomatic on the surface, they are genuinely concerned with preserving the relationships with members of the local culture.

While still feeling a bit like a fish out of water, the skilled worker becomes a cautious politician at this stage. They work hard to blend in with the social practices and customs that are consistent with the culture. Interacting with members of the local culture is becoming second nature on both the business and personal fronts.

They are very keen observers at this stage of cultural sensitivity. The skilled workers scan their environment and mimic behaviors that allow them to blend in. They reduce or control unacceptable behaviors that would cause them to stand out. They are much more skilled at acting and role playing.

It is also interesting to note that at this stage they tend to limit their business relationships to something that is personally manageable. This helps them foster more meaningful, successful relationships. They begin to depend on the local members who are business associates instead of turning to agents of their own culture.

As the skilled worker socializes with the members of the local culture, they develop relationships that are comfortable and intimate. As time goes on, they begin to have a more realistic understanding of the host culture. They begin to appreciate it.

Although at some level they realize that they are outsiders and always will be to some degree, they settle into their role within the culture and enjoy what they do glean from it.

The Partner: At home in a new culture

Not all workers achieve the partner stage of cultural sensitivity. It requires patience, perseverance, and work. It is at this stage that the worker is at their most sensitive to cultural distinctions. They have negotiated a business culture that is rooted in relational trust.

Partners share knowledge and intimately understand nuances of the culture, finding common ground

where possible. However, they put away any desires to be an insider of the local culture.

At this stage of cultural sensitivity, the person is not forgetting or denying their own culture. They are not putting their own background aside. Rather many find a deeper appreciation for their own culture and come to have a greater understanding of it. They notice and welcome elements of their own culture that they once took for granted.

This new, settled attitude allows the partner to more fully appreciate business and personal relationships. The partner is deeply immersed in the local culture, but is balanced and content with their role.

The “cultural sensitivity” journey is long and challenging, but can be very rewarding. Early on, [cultural misunderstandings](#) are bound to happen. As an individual becomes more familiar with and immersed in another culture, those bumps become fewer and fewer.

Coming to grips with another culture is like developing any other relationship that builds trust, little by little. It settles in a comfortable peace that isn't perfect but doesn't have to be. The individual identifies, adapts, and embraces their own role in the local culture, fitting in as they can.

Image Credit: [johnhain](#)

Reference

Shapiro, J. M., Ozanne, J. L., & Saaticioglu, B. (2008). An interpretive examination of the development of cultural sensitivity in international business. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 39, 71-87.

Retrieved: 09-16-2019

Updated: 09-15-2019

Published: 09-12-2019

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