Cross-cultural Competency

The ability to discern and account for one’s own and others’ world views and identify opportunities, make decisions, and resolve conflicts in ways that optimize cultural differences for better, longer lasting, more creative solutions.

One of the key personal mastery competencies that many diversity and HR practitioners believe they need is cross-cultural competency. However, the depth of this need is often underestimated.

What we understand clearly is why it is important: the overwhelming diversification of the workplace and our societies as we become more multicultural, multiethnic, multigenerational, multinational, and multi-every-other-diversity-dimension requires adeptness at effectively managing all these differences.

Where we tend to underestimate how deep this competency need goes is that too many of us think of cross-cultural competence without being aware of its hidden complexities, the opportunities it offers, and its potential impacts on our companies. For example, we understand that cross-cultural competency is critical for the practitioners of key HR functions, such as talent management, recruitment, or leadership development. But where cross-cultural competence needs to go deeper is where it should be applied not just to improving interpersonal skills but managing just about every dimension of today’s complex organizations.

In fact, here are just some examples of where cross-cultural competence is essential:

• Managing Deep Processes
• Managing In-country Diversity
• Executing Effective Multicultural Marketing
• Saving Lives
• Succeeding in a Globalized Economy

Let us look at each one of these in more detail.

Cross-cultural Competence is Required for Managing Deep Processes

It is essential to apply cross-cultural competence to the actual architecture, design, development, and delivery of operational strategies, structures, and programs. Let us illustrate what this looks like in an area replete with architectural, design,
Cross-cultural Competence or Cross-cultural Dexterity?

Some organizations are moving toward using the term cultural dexterity to imply the continuing evolution of cultural competence. While the two terms are very similar since both point to a specific skill set, a nuanced difference between them can be described as competence, being the full spectrum of capabilities to understand and adapt to differences (knowledge plus behavior) while dexterity represents the degree that one demonstrates (behavior) competence.

Here is why: statistics show that a significant number of M&As do not succeed, with a failure rate between 40 and 83 percent. The primary reason for such failure is the lack of “intercultural synergy” as described in a Diversity Best Practices Diversity and Inclusion Insights paper. (The Diversity Officer Role: Its Relevance During the Recession, Recovery and the Obama Era written by Philip Berry, president of a New York City-based management consulting firm.) Research suggests that up to 65 percent of failed mergers and acquisitions are due to people issues.

One example of this type of cross-cultural failure is represented by what happened when German carmaker Daimler-Benz merged with Chrysler USA in the late 1990s, forming DaimlerChrysler.

Despite good intentions and a sound strategic business case, the companies could not reconcile contrasting cultures and management styles. Daimler tried to run Chrysler just as it ran its German operations, which was characterized by methodical decision-making, but was counter to the Chrysler way of encouraging creativity and adaptability. With Chrysler’s values of American equal empowerment, efficiency, and adaptability running headlong into Daimler’s tradition of respect for hierarchy and centralized decision-making, the two companies divorced in 2007.

In the book, Managing Cultural Differences: Effective Strategy and Execution Across Cultures in Global Alliances, author Piero Morosini says that when cultural differences are not adequately taken into account during all stages of a merger, and especially during the evaluation and negotiation phase, the merger inevitably fails. He goes on to explain that how an organization deals with these intercultural challenges even after a merger is completed can make or break the merger.

Cross-cultural Competence is Required for Managing In-country Diversity

Another way in which diversity practitioners are underestimating the need to master cross-cultural competence is that it has gained popularity driven by the realities of globalization and the many cultural disconnects that happened between the Indians, the Brazilians, the Europeans, the Americans, and the Chinese. While this is significantly true, many cultural disconnections are happening among sub groupings within countries, including the United States, which also require the application of cross-cultural competence.

In the discussion of the “stereotype threat,” researchers Jennifer Flanagan and Raymond Green argue that the growing diversity of the U.S. workforce places a greater burden on managers to manage cross-cultural ignorance among employees: “The workplace dynamic, inundated with women and minority workers, has shifted, and managers cannot ignore the shift.” According to the two scholars, many employees still rely on generalizations about the people with whom they interact, reducing productivity and splintering the workforce. Managing the “stereotype threat” requires managers to “actively seek ... the cues that limit the contributions of all employees.”

Of course, managers should not ignore customs and attitudes common to particular culture, especially when they conflict with those of the dominant cultures. According to diversity consultant Anna Giraldo-Kerr, Latinos tend to value teamwork and some have “an expectation that the boss will recognize what you do and reward it and you shouldn’t have to worry about your colleagues stabbing you in the back. Knowing how to survive in the kind of cutthroat atmosphere that exists in some companies is really hard for some Latinos.”

The conflict between collectivist cultures and the liberal humanistic values of the United States create tensions in particular professions. Social workers struggle to bridge this divide both in working with colleagues and clients. According to Associate Professor Miu Chung Yan, PhD, this tension can “impose tremendous
Cross-cultural Competence is Required for Multicultural Marketing

Cross-cultural competence is the key element of successful multicultural marketing efforts, and cross-cultural incompetence can lead to disaster. A major U.S. soft drink firm, for example, invested in large bottling and distribution facilities across Indonesia in the hope of seizing substantial market share in that country of 176 million people. When dismal sales figures triggered an internal review, executives discovered that most Indonesians had little disposable income at that time and preferred non-carbonated, coconut-based drinks. This simple marketing misstep was compounded by a cross-cultural misalignment that did not take into account the host country’s customs, preferences, and traditions.

Many companies have made similar blunders that harmed their bottom lines and their brands. A major U.S. retailer launched its entry into Japan by investing more than $1 billion dollars to acquire 51 percent of one of the nation’s largest retailers with 410 supermarkets and general merchandise stores. The U.S. retailer urged its Japanese partner to dismiss 25 percent percent of its headquarters staff and moved aggressively to eliminate private distributors, Japanese culture prizes social harmony, group solidarity and loyalty, and found the mass firing shocking. These actions put the giant retailer’s Japanese strategy and its investment in jeopardy.

Cross-cultural competence is becoming more critical as companies become more sophisticated in targeting their marketing efforts at subsets of particular populations. According to MMR (Mass Market Retailer), U.S. companies need to develop and implement “multicultural strategies that transcend general stereotypes.” Consumer companies and research firms are taking much more nuanced approaches to attracting the Latino consumer. The growing sophistication intensifies the need for multicultural expertise.

Of course, diversity professionals have a number of invaluable tools at their disposal for gathering invaluable marketing intelligence. Employee Research Groups (ERG’s), for example, have proven to be vital resources, providing insights into the communities they represent. Consumer retail giant P&G relies on its ERGs to burnish its excellent reputation for multi-cultural marketing. The Hispanic Leadership Team (HLT) provided essential counsel and support for P&G’s “Orgullosa” (Proud) initiative. Launched in 2011, the program “celebrate[s], empower[s], and fuel[s] Latinos’ accomplishments and dreams.”

Orgullosa are electronic forums where “Latinas can engage in a dialogue with one another.” By offering counsel on beauty, household, and lifestyle choices, Orgullosa provides P&G a channel for promoting its products relevant to Latinas.

The African Ancestry Leadership Network (AALN) and the Corporate Women’s Leadership Team, (CWLT) AALN and CWLT members participated in the launch of “My Black is Beautiful,” which addressed the perception of “71 percent of black women [who] felt their beauty was often ignored and not celebrated like that of other women in media.” Designed to help black women develop their own vision of African-American beauty, and with the ongoing support of ERGs, the campaign has grown into an online community of 600,000 women. P&G has targeted this market with a series of profitable beauty and home care brands.

Cross-cultural Competence Is Required to Save Lives

A typical medical setting represents a proving ground for cross-cultural competence and the life and death reasons behind it.

“It is all about saving lives, and cultural competency is directly related to that goal,” said Velois Bowers, vice president for diversity and inclusion at CHRISTUS Health, a Catholic health system with hospitals and facilities in the United States and Mexico. Every day patients arrive at a medical center’s door seeking medical care and service. Every day employees, from front desk receptionists and transportation attendants to specialized physicians, nurses and behind-the-scene staff, enter their workplace focused on patients and with the intent to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Then we can add to this mix the third parties, such as insurers, medical suppliers, board members, volunteers, contract doctors and other allied medical specialists, who rely on the cross-cultural competence of medical personnel to provide culturally sensitive and quality information so that these third parties can perform their jobs.

Despite this obvious need for cross-cultural competence, our healthcare industry grapples with significant health disparities for people of color that are directly related to its absence. For example, Bowers continued, if a Black person walks into a hospital and the registration associate asks for that patient’s Medicaid card, the associate is making the assumption that all Blacks are on some type of assistance. When in fact, the patient may be employed with his or her own private insurance. That is a cultural misstep that may make anyone question the quality of care provided by that particular institution.

A November 2012 Diversity Best Practices article by diversity consultant Howie Schaffer, recounted three cross-cultural events in a healthcare setting.
Indian man with long braids does not want a female nurse to touch his hair. A Bosnian son will not tell his mother that she has a terminal illness. A Latino man is reluctant to change his diet to address a medical condition because of the expected teasing he will receive from co-workers about what he eats for lunch.

Contrary to easy and facile pronouncements about the attitudes held by these three patients that can include attitudes like “How sexist,” or “Just tell her,” or even “Who cares what they say about your lunch,” in actuality, these incidents highlight some of the deep, but barely visible, cultural differences about appropriate behavior between genders, communication, and self-identity that can be missed by anyone, including medical staff. These examples illustrate the myriad variances of culture that patients bring with them to the doctor’s office and that affect their medical outcomes. So what is a medical professional supposed to do?

It is impractical to expect anyone to hold an encyclopedic knowledge of every cultural nuance that can show up. We can, however, expect and help employees understand that there may be a cultural basis for what may seem like medical non-compliance or irresponsible concerns and train them in ways to inquire about and address these differences with sensitivity and respect. Such cross-cultural competence can only enhance the staff’s ability to provide quality and dignified care.17

What were the outcomes in those three examples? After recognizing that there may be more to the patients’ reluctance than stubbornness or sexism, the clinical staff learned some American Indians consider their braids to be a source for their warrior spirit and having a female touch the braid would be a boundary violation. The staff made sure that a male nurse would assist the patient whenever there was a risk of touching the patient’s hair.

In the Bosnian culture, it was learned that telling patients they have a terminal illness could cause them to lose all hope and prevent them from living out the final days peacefully. The son, with support from family and medical staff, never informed his mother, and the family spent the mother’s last days with her, as they wanted.

The dietician for the Latino male encouraged the patient to take his lunch to work, thereby meeting the dietary changes he needed to make, while at the same time, avoiding the ridicule he expected from making similar dietary selections in the company cafeteria.16

These examples exhibit how cross-cultural competence can change misperceptions about others’ responses into ways of finding mutually adaptive actions that can improve outcomes for all concerned—patients and medical staff.

Cross-cultural Competence Is Required to Succeed in a Globalized Economy

A Harvard Business Review article gives the example of an Indian manager working on a companywide IT project that required the skills of a multicultural, cross-national team. The manager experienced the frustration of differing views about authority, decision-making and communication styles among the team members—the Indian manager, a counterpart from Singapore, and a couple of Japanese team members.

There were problems almost from the beginning. In discussions around the project, for instance, “the Japanese members seemed to be saying yes, but in the Indian manager’s view, their follow-through was insufficient,” the article explained. The situation deteriorated to the point where the entire project was threatened as discussion around completion dates became contentious. The manager came up with the idea of building consensus with the entire Japanese IT department, not just the ones assigned to the project. He and his Singaporean counterpart put together an “eBusiness road show,” which highlighted the successes of other projects and their alignment with the company’s strategic priorities. This presentation was shared with the entire Japanese IT department. This subtle ploy worked. Wanting to be spotlighted in future road shows, the entire Japanese IT team, including the two assigned to this specific project, worked on meeting the project’s objectives.

The beauty of this approach was not the creativity of the road show, but how this solution serves as an example of cross-cultural competence by the Indian and Singaporean managers.17 They were able to address the different cultural views of language and communication styles (what does “yes” really mean), authority (solving the problem without going to supervisors), and teamwork (the message of the road shows illustrated the value and rewards of working together.) No simple list of what to do or not do, or how to hand out business cards in Japan, Singapore, or India, for example, would have helped this IT project. The situation required an understanding that differences existed in how to get work done and addressing those differences from a win-win-win perspective.

Determining Your Cross-cultural Competence

Globalization is accelerating the need for the rest of us to become more cross-culturally competent, because more companies—multinationals and domestic—are driven to compete and win internationally, especially in emerging markets.

The tried and tired methods of compiling country-by-country or group-by-group “do’s and don’ts” lists no longer cut it. Commerce in today’s world is simply too complex and too complicated and people and organizations are too multidimensional for leaders to rely on such approaches.
So, if simply learning about the “must-do’s” and the taboos is ineffective, if viewing our employees and organizations in one dimension is inadequate and incomplete, and if possessing a cross-cultural skill is a business and leadership requirement, then how do business leaders and diversity professionals become effectively cross-culturally competent?

Dr. Milton Bennett with the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provides a way to become more cross-culturally competent. The DMIS framework has been used around the world, in developed countries and developing ones and with traditional societies as well as with progressive ones. Most people find the DMIS practical, relevant, and easy to understand. The underlying assumption of the model is that as one’s experience with cultural differences becomes more complex, one’s potential competence in intercultural interactions increases. 

The model uses two overarching stages of development (with three sub-stages for each phase) to describe the journey to becoming cross-culturally competent: Ethnocentrism, the first stage, means that we use our own experiences – our upbringing by caregivers and the society we grew up in, along with its formal and informal institutions like school, places of worship and the media – to guide what we think, feel, or understand about the behavior of others. It is demonstrated by having little interest in cultural differences, believing that one’s culture is the true and right one, and minimizing the differences between cultures. The second stage, ethnorelativism, is the ability to “walk two moons in another person’s moccasins.” It is the ability to step back and imagine events or experiences from someone else’s perspective. In this stage, there is the belief that cultural differences are real, important, and should be respected. People at this level often shift their thinking and actions to incorporate different cultural perspectives, and they may even adopt the cultural views of others into their own thinking.

While the DMIS model explains the spectrum of the cross-cultural competencies, it is the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) that actually measures where an individual, group, or organization sits on the continuum. The IDI is a 50-item, theory-and evidence-based instrument that provides an in-depth graphic profile of one’s worldview orientation and placement on the DMIS spectrum. The IDI is currently available in 15 languages including Arabic, Bahasa Indonesian, Chinese, Czech, English, French, German, Japanese, and Russian. Together, the DMIS and the IDI enable anyone, including diversity practitioners, to get a handle on their level of cross-cultural competence. And that is an important step on this cross-cultural journey.

**Strengthening Your Cross-cultural Competence**

**Early-Career Professionals/Individual Contributors**

The first step to becoming cross-culturally competent is to understand yours and others’ worldviews, which means having a solid understanding of your own cultural background and diversity challenges – the strengths, weaknesses, biases, and stereotypes that come from your particular cultural background. We all have them. This may start the early-career professional or individual contributor on the path of seminars and trainings. It may mean taking the IDI and learning where you fit on the DMIS scale. Keep in mind, though, one or two workshops or a snapshot of your standing are just the beginning and are insufficient to make one cross-culturally competent.

Once you have figured out your own cultural standing, it is time to broaden your understanding and start learning about others in your circle of influence. An early-career professional will seek feedback on obvious and obscure cultural events to increase his or her knowledge. Styles of communication are one of the things you may learn in seminars and workshops. Applying this information to your day-to-day interactions with a variety of colleagues can strengthen your ability to work with co-workers from different backgrounds.

In a meeting, for example, the early-career professional may notice how some people speak easily and confidently in front of a group. Others in the same meeting may have valuable insights to share, but because of culture or personality, may be reluctant to do so. Archetypically, Asians may defer to supervisors and those higher up in the company hierarchy and avoid speaking up, or they may avoid direct eye contact. European Americans may perceive these behaviors by their Asian colleagues as having nothing worthwhile to say or avoiding something, when in actuality, they are trying to show deference to the senior members in the meeting. As a cross-culturally competent early career professional, you can adjust your own behaviors to encourage greater participation from your Asian colleagues. And when you are on the receiving end of a presentation by colleagues who may act in this manner, you will be able to respond accordingly.
Here is an area where the early-career professional can really improve their cultural understanding of others. Most cultures have ways to acknowledge holidays, celebrations, and significant life events. What is specific to each culture, however, are what events are celebrated and how those events are celebrated. Early-career diversity professionals can be tasked with taking care of the department calendar, the schedule for meetings, conferences and other gatherings. Taking the time to learn about the holidays and celebratory events from other cultures and using that information for scheduling can demonstrate your cultural sensitivity to diverse groups. For instance, in scheduling a department-wide meeting, it is a good idea to look at a diversity calendar to see if there are major holidays or cultural conflicts. For example, for Jewish colleagues, scheduling an all-staff meeting on Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah can cause a conflict between their work and religious life.

One of the most important things an early-career practitioner can do to improve your own cultural sensitivity and encourage it of others is to ask questions and to listen with an open mind. Ask questions to verify understanding of what was said in a way that encourages further conversation and exploration of different perspectives. Ask questions to make sure that everyone who should be included in meetings, discussions, or other events is identified. And listen for answers or themes that indicate commonalities across different groups to support mutual understanding and resolve cross-cultural conflicts.

**Mid-career Professionals/Leveraged Contributors**

As a mid-career diversity professional, you may have recognized the need, and started to become more cross-culturally competent. You may have already reconciled your own diversity challenges, or at least, have started working on them. There is more for you to do. Assembling a dynamic internal and external cross-cultural network provides a way to keep learning and growing.

Several years ago, Hewitt (now Aon Hewitt) and Mary-Frances Winters of the Winters Group created a program, Cross-cultural Learning Partners, that paired employees who were culturally different from each other. With assignments that included specific readings, movies, or talk shows, the pairs were encouraged to discuss their different worldviews and perceptions from the assignments. Each pair was given an IDI at the beginning and end of the program, and all had progressed in their cross-cultural competence. One testimonial from the first group sounded like this:

> A Human Resources leader speaking about the Gen X African-American trainer with whom he was partnered: “Charles [not his real name] helped me see around corners I would not have ever been able to see around. I especially realized this when he took me to the Chicago Theater for an evening

Seek out programs similar to the Cross-cultural Learning Partners or develop your own. You can leave your comfort zone by attending cultural and entertainment events, listening to news shows, or reading materials that challenge your cultural worldview. You can solicit invitations to a religious ceremony or service that is different from yours. Then ask others to help you understand what you have seen or heard and to provide their perspectives. Continually seeking out understanding of others’ cultural differences will enable you to recognize that there are multiple “right” ways to get things done.

It is important for the culturally competent mid-career professional to have a working knowledge of conversational phrases in multiple languages. No one expects you to become fluent overnight, but having a few phrases in your back pocket can help break the ice when speaking with others who lack full and complete fluency in English. If you speak only one language, probably English, it would also help to take a class or online course to learn a new one. Bilingual managers are a valuable asset in the global marketplace. While English is the language of commerce and most global interactions are held in English, trying to communicate in another language will also help you understand the difficulty others have doing the same thing when English is their second or third tongue.

As a manager at your workplace, the cross-culturally competent mid-career professional integrates multiple cultural frameworks, values, and norms into organizational processes, procedures, and practices. Yet balance is important, which is why developing systems that simultaneously takes into account the need for some conformity with valuing different approaches and styles. BMO Financial Services in Canada has found a way to do just that by embedding cross-cultural sensitivity across the entire organization, such as in its sales and marketing functions.

The organization’s account managers avoid making cold sales calls at inappropriate times during Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Light, or Eid, which marks the end of Ramadan to respect the traditions of clients who observe those holidays. Spread its cultural competence throughout the bank, BMO also took special effort to
reach out to its Chinese-Canadian customers by establishing a Chinese speaking banking division, online Chinese services, ATMs with Chinese language options, and call centers with Cantonese and Mandarin speaking representatives. This required integrating cross-cultural sensitivities across many of the banks functions and departments, including consumer-facing areas such as sales and marketing, call center operations and back-office operations such as IT, client records, auditing and compliance.25

The earlier discussion on training made the case that training alone was insufficient to make individuals or organizations cross-culturally competent. But training has its place, and must be considered as one of the tools in your diversity toolbox. The mid-career diversity professional must collaborate with other departments to institutionalize cultural competence education throughout the organization. Sodexo, Inc., a global integrated food services and facilities management organization, provides some type of training around diversity and culture issues for all of its 400,000 employees across 82 countries. Some of the education offerings are mandatory; others are up to the employees’ discretion.

Through its Sodexo University Learning Center, the company offers courses online and in workshops or seminars on topics ranging from generations in the workplace to cross-cultural communications,” according to the company’s website. Sodexo also offers a “Cultural Navigator,” a web-based tool that helps employees work around and understand the various cultural differences they will encounter in the course of their positions. The Cultural Navigator is designed to make “working in a global, multicultural, and multilingual environment easier.”26 Like Sodexo’s Cultural Navigator, cross-cultural competency is designed to make working across cultures, both domestically and internationally, more effective and productive.

**Senior-level professionals /Leader**

Many assume that once a diversity practitioner – whether a CDO or C-suite level HR leader – reaches the upper echelons of an organization, he or she is probably cross-culturally competent. The Korn/Ferry report cautions against being satisfied with past success, stating, “The paradox is that experienced executives … often find it difficult to accept that their policies and approaches are not universal, nor even optimal in other environments.”25 Avoid resting on your past accomplishments, because there is always something more to learn, something new to try, or something else to do to get your organization as cross-culturally competent as possible.

Like a muscle that needs to be strengthened, this competency is a developmental process that requires ongoing practice and learning. Senior leaders have to put aside their egos, reveal some of their own shortcomings, and lead by example that the commitment to lifelong learning and practice is personally and professionally valuable.

So how does a senior leader know when he or she is strengthening the cross-culturally competent muscle? When it comes to accounting for your worldview and those of others, you must demonstrate the confidence and ability to put at ease people from different cultures and regions in situations encompassing different forms of diversity. This ability requires a type of *jogo de cintura* (a Brazilian term that describes subtle hip and waist feints used in soccer against an opponent), or the flexibility and versatility that can be used to take into account all kinds of differences, not just traditional diversity dimensions.

It is the same skill required to navigate differences in thinking styles, functional roles, and organizational cultures. CHRISTUS Health’s Bowers talks about this type of adaptability in building relationships and being in tune to the emotional temperature of individuals or of groups in meetings. More than just making others comfortable, senior leaders use this ability to adapt and flex their own interpersonal and management style in order to determine when to ask, advocate, drive, or act decisively in cross-cultural situations. And most business situations are cross-cultural ones.

The cross-culturally competent leader maintains a network of professional relationships with thought leaders and others who work to create diverse and inclusive environments. You can seek out these like-minded leaders by serving as a member of professional diversity organizations, such as Diversity Best Practices, or by attending diversity conferences such as those offered by the Society for Human Resource Management or the Conference Board.

Even though cross-cultural competency represents a personal mastery skill, the whole point of using it is to benefit your organizations by embedding cultural insights into company systems and processes. You do this by collaborating with your peers and other business leaders, such as HR, Marketing, or Corporate Communications, so that company policies, procedures, practices, and communications reflect a deep understanding of the differing worldviews of your employees, external cultural communities, and different countries or regions.

Up to this point, we have been discussing cross-cultural competency as if it were a straightforward, linear progression starting from Milton Bennett’s ethnocentrism moving toward ethnorelativism. We touched on many of the discrete skills and steps needed to move along competency’s continuum, constantly moving from one level of understanding and practice toward a more elevated level. It may sound
like a basic, step-by-step recipe for chocolate chip cookies. If only cross-cultural competency were that simple. It is not. Conflicts in the workplace are inevitable. Progress is made in erratic, herky- jerky, two-steps forward, one-step back moves. Personalities get involved. Cultural worldviews may be offended. Antagonistic words can be tossed about like grenades on a battlefield. Feelings are hurt. And this kind of situation can occur when company leaders gather to decide whether to fund or reject a specific corporate initiative.

Here is the challenging part. As the senior diversity leader in your company, you must assume the task of diffusing such situations by helping others see the value in discordant and dissenting perspectives. When you collaborate with other business leaders in this way, you help everyone create an inclusive culture that uses conflict to encourage innovation and new ways of thinking and getting things done. You may find that the people working for you represent a broad range of cultures, ethnicities, geographies, sexual orientation, personalities, and worldviews, which can lead to conflicts and impede productivity. As a leader, you will have to leverage the divergent approaches of your team members to deepen and broaden your function’s reach and impact, or to put it simply, to practice what you preach.

Will it be easy? Rarely. Will it be effective and worth the effort? You bet it will.

You and your team will have to work hard to make the situation work; otherwise, your team will be undone by the differences. You will have to be intentional in efforts and call out differences in interpersonal and working relationships. You will have to assume positive intent on the part of others, be self-aware of how your individual worldviews could lead to subjective interpretations, and listen to your colleague’s side of any issue while resolutely working toward resolution. You will not always be successful; few things are 100 percent. But when your efforts work, richer relationships and more innovative outcomes will be the result.

**Impediments to Cross-cultural Competency**

Inevitable workplace clashes are not the major obstacles to becoming cross-culturally competent. You can learn the discrete, observable, and trainable skills and behaviors. The major impediment to this competency, however, can be summed up by specific attitudes or mindsets, namely, apathy and indifference. Early-career, mid-career, or senior-level professionals will not learn the behaviors and actions for cross-cultural competence when they lack curiosity about cultural differences; when they hold fast to judgments that about the unfamiliar or uncomfortable; or when they remain home-country-centric or nationalistic in their approaches to other regions of the world.

This apathy and indifference can be seen in the actions of those lacking this competency. When colleagues start shaming or suppressing opposing behaviors or opinions, you know that cross-cultural competency is not their strong suit. Likewise, favoritism for specific groups over others and exclusionary behavior indicate a poor grasp of this skill set. And for the senior diversity leader, failing to lead by example or neglecting to integrate cultural sensitivities into a company’s culture and practices are all signs that a lot more work needs to be done on cross-cultural competency.

**Conclusion**

No matter where you travel in the world, you will find substantive differences. In the United States, the challenging differences may be based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or ability. In India, it may be based on caste, which has legally been abolished, but is still practiced in some areas. While in China differences based on language, region, or education can pose a problem. Even in Europe where many criticize the United States for its focus on race and ethnicity, the continent’s history is rife with cultural differences that have led (and lead) to wars, ethnic cleansing, and frustration. One common difference that resonates across the globe is discrimination against women. The solution to these challenges is not to eradicate differences, but to leverage them, manage them, and understand the underlying reasons behind them.

The dizzying state of the world today mandates that we work on doing just that. The only way to keep up with ever-changing collision of values, identities, and experiences, to cope with the chaotic pace of global change is for individuals and organizations to develop cross-cultural competence.

In business cross-cultural competency enables us to change underlying assumptions about managing differences and our talent management, rewards and compensation, employee development and benefit practices. It is about the structures and processes we put in place to get things done, and even how we train employees. It requires a systemic approach that invites us to look at our cultural differences, call them out, ask deep and probing questions, and suspend our own cultural judgments. Cross-cultural competency is an ongoing, ever-evolving practice with no other alternative.

Most diversity initiatives are rooted in a U.S.-centric perspective that does not readily incorporate the values espoused by cross-cultural competence. A *Harvard Business Review* article discussed how Americans who are members of multinational teams often “learn that the American way simply cannot be imposed on other cultures.” Unless there are moves to help senior leaders become more cross-culturally competent, we will see more cultural missteps because large proportions
of chief diversity officers lack any global experience and often rise through the HR ranks to their current posts.

This situation may change as we move forward and companies recognize that CDOs need to be able to address the cultural implications of mergers and acquisitions, international governmental relations, trade relations, manufacturing (such as design and selection of locations), security, ethics and international marketing. Add in social media and communications technology, which we will address in Chapter 8, and you have the markings for a new kind of officer, perhaps a Chief Cross-cultural Officer.

While the Chief Cross-cultural Officer is not a current post in most companies, today’s CDOs will have to assume those responsibilities, especially as many organizations leave their shores and do business overseas. CDOs who master cross-cultural competence will have what they need domestically and internationally to face the frustration, roadblocks, and other obstacles related to how things are done, communicated, decided, designed, and deployed in today’s global and hyper-diverse world.

**Conversation Starters**

How cross-culturally competent is your organization? How do you measure this competency?

What initiatives are in place or planned to help increase the cross-cultural competence of employees and the organization?

How will cross-cultural competency strengthen your organization?

How do you know when a disagreement between colleagues is culturally based, personality-based, or merely a difference of opinion?

What organizational assumptions will be challenged by increased cross-cultural competence by senior leaders?

**Endnotes**


14 Telephone interview with Velois Bowers, vice president of diversity and inclusion, CHRISTUS Health, May 1, 2013.
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20 Developing Intercultural Competence website, last accessed June 20, 2013 http://www.idiinventory.com/