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Cultural Intelligence in Business Settings

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CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE IN BUSINESS SETTINGs Learning how to effectively synthesize solutions as a team with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, motivations, and behaviors will quickly set you apart in the workplace, even within your own country.

By Tanner Wegrowski

A few years ago, I boarded a plane leaving London for my new job in Johannesburg, South Africa. As I tried to figure out how my body was supposed to fit in a seat that looked like it was tailored for a toddler, I made eye contact with a young man carrying a bag labeled with the name of the organization that employed me. Presuming we shared the same final destination, I greeted him from down the aisle with the most professional greeting my 18-year-old self could muster. I nodded my head upwards, flashed a good ol’ American “peace sign,” and gracefully articulated a heart-felt grunt.

To someone who hasn’t spent significant time in the UK (such as my 18-year-old self), that may seem like an appropriate greeting between teenagers, monkeys, or any other species with a similar form of uncultured communication. In the UK, however, when giving the typical American “peace sign” with the palm of the hand facing inwards, it’s like saying hello with your middle finger.

Fortunately, that miscommunication was reconciled when we reached Johannesburg and worked closely together over the next couple of years, and despite my continual off-color jokes about British-American history, we’re still friends today.

I was fortunate enough to have no public influence or position of power at the time of my cross-cultural blunder, others, however, are not so lucky. In 1992, George H. W. Bush made a similar mistake when he flashed an American “peace sign” while touring Australia, where, like the UK, such a gesture is obscene.1 It happened to be directed towards a group of farmers in Canberra who were protesting US farm subsidiaries, so if that means less Vegemite imports in the US, then maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing.

Whichever way you might see it, culture is all around and inside us, yet we are rarely aware of its presence until we encounter one that contrasts our own (such as my friend’s shock in my aforementioned story and thought, “What’s wrong with head nods and grunting?” then either you’re a teenager, monkey, or in any and all cases, your CQ likely has some room for improvement.

Motivational CQ is the level of personal interest, drive, or passion an individual has in developing the ability to adapt to different cultures. In analyzing how you rank in this quadrant, you might ask yourself the following questions:

Do I enjoy being in culturally diverse environments?

What are the tangible benefits I extrapolate from my cultural experiences?

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Before we can define cultural intelligence, we have to understand what culture is. The word itself has evolved into a sort of buzzword that is often coupled with other words and phrases that have wiggled their way into the business lexicon, such as “company culture,” “culture shock,” or “counter-culture.” In fact, a friend told me just recently that my taste in movies is “uncultured” (I’ve never seen Pirates of the Caribbean, so what?) But what is culture really?

To Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede, it’s “the collective programming of the mind” that sets one society apart from another;2 to my friend who grew up in the countryside of South Carolina, it’s “the way we do things ‘round these parts.”3 To put it into perspective, if you read my aforementioned story and thought, “What’s wrong with head nods and grunting?” then either you’re a teenager, monkey, or in any and all cases, your CQ likely has some room for improvement.

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WHAT IS CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE?

Christopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski coined the term cultural intelligence, or CQ, as “an outsider’s seemingly natural ability to interpret someone’s unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures the way that person’s compatriots would.”4 To put it into perspective, if you read my aforementioned story and thought, “What’s wrong with head nods and grunting?” then either you’re a teenager, monkey, or in any and all cases, your CQ likely has some room for improvement.

If you were to go into any business forum in Europe and America and ask which country is going to be the most important in the global environment in the next 25 years, I suspect that a vast majority would say China, and the second-highest number might say India. If you then ask how much do people in Europe and America understand about the history and culture of those countries, the answer would be a negligible amount.”

-Doug Flint, Chair of HSBC
refers to the adaptation of cultural knowledge to a specific context, such as how one manages a hospital in a given country as opposed to a school.

In analyzing how you rank in this quadrant, you might ask yourself the following questions:

Do I know how to communicate effectively with people of a different culture?

Do I know what is important to people of differing cultures?

Do I know how to effectively perform my job in a culturally-diverse environment?

**METACOGNITION**

Though it sounds like one of those yoga terms people like to use but don’t really understand, cultural metacognition is quite easy to understand, but much more difficult in practice. Metacognitive CQ is the level of ability an individual has to strategize before, during, and after experiencing a different culture. This involves planning, being aware of, and reviewing one’s intercultural experiences.

In analyzing how you rank in this quadrant, you might ask yourself the following questions:

Do I take time to prepare for cross-cultural encounters?

Am I aware of what’s going on in my head as well as others’ during my intercultural experiences?

Do I review my cross-cultural encounters and recalibrate my actions and reactions if necessary?

**BEHAVIOR**

Behavioral CQ is the level of ability an individual has to act responsibly in differing cross-cultural interactions. This includes speaking, sending verbal messages, and conveying nonverbal messages. Speaking responsibly means that the words you use are appropriate in the given culture; sending appropriate verbal messages involves correctly using volume, tone, speed and pitch for the given situation; and communicating effectively with nonverbal messages includes paying attention to hand movements, signs, and facial expressions.

In analyzing how you rank in this quadrant, you might ask yourself the following questions:

Do the words I use appropriate in a given culture?

Do the way I speak help or harm my message in a given culture?

Do my body language help or harm my message in a given culture?

**BUILDING IT UP**

If you answered these questions positively, good for you! You’re well on your way to cross-cultural success. But perhaps you lead a group or organization with members who are not quite as adept in navigating cultural differences. How do you deal with an expatriate employee who is more concerned about the moving expenses than how to adapt to the local culture? How do you speak to your manager who is frustrated that the contract she extended to a client in Shanghai hasn’t been returned, and it’s well past the deadline?

Helping to elevate the CQ of those within your organization can be daunting, and if your compatriots aren’t motivated, knowledgeable, cognitive, metacognitive, or well-behaved, it’s nearly impossible.

The good news is that you’ve already started the first step! I suppose you wouldn’t be reading this if you weren’t motivated to improve your personal cultural intelligence. Whether you currently work abroad, are starting a new job in a firm with an unfamiliar culture, or just want to learn how to effectively communicate with someone who sees differently than you do, cultural intelligence will help you enrich your interpersonal interactions and make the world a better place for everyone.

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Notes