

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIPⁱ **Milton J. Bennett, Ph.D.**

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Over the last thirty-five years, the field of intercultural relations has developed some sophisticated methods for developing intercultural competence. Gone are the days when the only approach to an assignment abroad was “sink or swim.” And fast disappearing are the organizations who still say “the way we do it here is the way we do it everywhere.”

It is now possible to prepare global managers and leaders to *learn how to learn* in new cross-cultural situations, thus speeding up their adaptability and improving their productivity. For experienced hands, the new methods allow them to enhance their own experience and to share it more effectively with the next generation of leaders.

New approaches can also add intercultural competence to the curriculum of a learning organization. Truly global organizations have moved beyond “think globally, act locally.” They have acquired the ability to continually learn from the global environment and to support the *virtual third cultures* necessary for effective multicultural communication.

One of the things we have learned is that cross-cultural contact alone is insufficient for the development of intercultural competence, and that it may even be detrimental under certain circumstances.ⁱⁱ Were it the case that contact alone generated competence, citizens of neighboring nations would be particularly good at communicating with one another, and native-born members of national groups would be particularly adept at understanding immigrants to their country. What we see, of course, is usually the opposite. Neighbors are more likely to hate each other, and immigrants are often the most misunderstood of groups. For the same reasons, international corporate assignments do not in themselves usually generate intercultural competence.

For cross-cultural contact to be constructive, it needs to be accompanied by certain conditions.ⁱⁱⁱ Primary among those conditions is the recognition of deep differences in cultural worldviews and the potential value of those differences for organizations. This condition is the *intercultural mindset*. Equally important is the ability to use learning-to-learn frameworks to identify potential areas of misunderstanding and to increase one’s repertoire of behavior appropriately.^{iv} This second condition is the *intercultural skillset*. A third condition is the ability to experience cultural difference in sophisticated ways, which is referred to as *intercultural sensitivity*.^v Current research is showing that the potential for intercultural competence is related to various developmental stages of sensitivity.^{vi}

These three factors – the intercultural mindset, skillset, and level of sensitivity – can be systematically developed through training and other educational efforts. The following sections will touch on the constituents of each of these factors.

The Intercultural Mindset

Investing in Intercultural Competence

One of the great potential advantages of global corporations is their access to global human resources. Rosabeth Moss-Kanter of Harvard Business School has written that competitive edge in the 21st century will not derive from simple technological dominance; rather, it will accrue to those organizations that can deploy their global human resources effectively.^{vii} In other words, advantage will accrue to those who learn how to turn access to global resources into assets. Managing such a workforce demands intercultural competence.^{viii}

Within global organizations, project teams are often composed of people from various cultures. Whether real or virtual, these multicultural teams embody both obstacles and opportunities. Nancy Adler of McGill University School of Business has summarized research showing that multicultural teams appear to be either more productive or less productive than monocultural teams.^{ix} Multicultural teams with assignments demanding creativity and with an interculturally competent leader are more productive than their monocultural counterparts. However, multicultural teams with similar assignments and leaders who suppress cultural difference (usually in the name of the common corporate culture) underperform the monocultural groups. No corporate executive wants to reduce the creativity of project teams. In a global organization, the only alternative is to increase the intercultural competence of those teams and their leaders.

Everywhere is Rome

A common saying among moderately experienced international managers is, “when in Rome, do as the Romans.” This aphorism is probably better than the more naïve, “doesn’t everyone do it the same (my) way?” But the reality in global organizations is that *everywhere is Rome*. If cultural diversity is indeed being used as a resource, then every team in every division at every location in the world is multicultural. It is unclear that a team composed of one German, one Nigerian, one Brazilian, one Scots, and one U.S. American that happens to be meeting in Germany should necessarily “do as the Germans.” Nor is it clear that that national culture roots of an organization should dominate these meetings, although the basic corporate values must certainly be respected. What needs to happen is that everyone attempts to adapt to everyone else. The result of this effort is not chaos. Rather, a “virtual third culture” is generated, which becomes the dominant culture for the working life of that particular group^x. Leaders with an intercultural mindset recognize that a competent global organization must be able to intentionally generate and manage these third cultures.

The multicultural workforce of global corporations does not just consist of international cultural diversity. Cultural diversity also includes domestic differences in ethnic or national heritage, gender, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, and professional group, among many others. The need for successful recruitment, retention, and management of this diverse workforce cuts across domestic and international boundaries. There are, of course, different historical and political factors accompanying domestic and international relations. For example, the history of slavery that affects relations between U.S. Americans of European or African descent is not particularly relevant to U.S./China relations, where ideological differences are more salient; and conversely, communism is currently not much of a consideration in U.S. domestic relations. Yet underlying these factors is the same need for basic communicative competence in dealing with diverse cultures. The new methods described here apply to all cross-cultural relations, both domestic and international.

The goal for organizations is to create a *climate of respect for diversity*. It is this climate that attracts workers, retains them, and creates the conditions for increased productivity. It is the responsibility of global leaders to know how to foster such a climate.

Cultural Experience, Not Cultural Products

An ability to glean the advantages of cultural diversity depends on an understanding of the idea of “culture” itself. Some definitions of culture are more useful than others in achieving intercultural competence. For instance, it is common to think of culture as a collection of artifacts, institutions, and customs. This idea of *objective culture* is good for understanding the different histories of peoples and for appreciating the diversity of products they have created. However, such knowledge is not particularly useful in itself for managing multicultural teams. Too many “experts” in objective culture, including many experienced and well-educated international managers, still cannot communicate

effectively with people from that culture. What we have learned is that *knowledge does not equal competence*. Knowledge of objective culture is necessary but insufficient for developing and maintaining intercultural relations.

For our purposes, a more useful definition of culture is “the coordination of meaning and action in a group.” This idea of *subjective culture* gives us more direct insight into the worldview of different culture groups, and it is this insight that translates into more effective management. While it may be of some importance to acknowledge different holidays, eating customs, forms of artistic expression, or other objective cultural differences among employees, these gestures are superficial at best. At worst, they may even seem patronizing to minority groups. The real crux of creating a climate of respect for diversity is demonstrating understanding of varying subjective cultures and their potential contribution to creativity.

The idea of subjective culture is the key to understanding the junction between international and domestic diversity. Although some peoples have histories that are far more extensive than others’, although some people carry unequal burdens of oppression or perquisites of privilege, they are all equal (but different) in the complexity of their cultural worldviews. It is this “similarity of difference” that allows us to reach beyond the political and historical issues of race, power, and oppression into our epistemological diversity. While acknowledging the fact of our political and historical inequality, we can simultaneously respect the equal complexity and potential usefulness of each of our perspectives. In business terms, the combination of acknowledgment and respect is the best bet for avoiding intercultural problems and creating intercultural advantage.

Using Cultural Generalizations, Avoiding Cultural Stereotypes

People sometimes resist the idea of subjective culture because it seems like a “label.” They are justifiably trying to avoid *cultural stereotypes*. Unfortunately, their answer to how to avoid such stereotyping is often, “treat every person as a individual.” This is its own form of cultural chauvinism, imposing as it does a Western notion of individualism on every situation. But more importantly, this reversion to an ethnocentrism impedes the acquisition of intercultural competence. It is more useful to avoid cultural stereotypes with accurate *cultural generalizations*.

Good cultural generalizations are based on systematic cross-cultural research. They refer to predominant tendencies among groups of people, so they are not labels for individuals. A given individual may exhibit the predominant group tendency a lot, a little, or not at all. So cultural generalizations must be applied to individuals as tentative hypotheses, open to verification.

Further, cultural generalizations can be used to describe cultural groups at varying *levels of abstraction*. For instance, it is possible to make some cultural contrasts between peoples of Western cultures and peoples of Eastern cultures. Such cultural groupings are at a very high level of abstraction, so they only support very general contrasts such as “more individualistic” versus “more collectivist.” On the other end of the abstraction ladder, a relatively specific cultural grouping such as Northern Mexican might be compared to a similarly specific grouping such as Southwestern U.S. In this case, it would be possible to make more specific contrasts in cultural style. In the middle of the abstraction ladder lie groupings such as North America versus Northern European, a level that supports generalizations such as the ones made in the following sections. It is important to remember that the level of abstraction chosen for a cultural contrast does not mean that more specific contrasts are being rejected. For instance, the level could be chosen to contrast Teutonic cultures such as Germany to Latin cultures such as France in Europe, or to identify differences among various ethnic groups such as European American and African American in the U.S.

The choice of level of abstraction should be based on the learning-to-learn needs of the situation. Corporate executives who deal with dozens of different cultures in a year need a framework at a moderate level of abstraction – general enough to translate across a wide range of cultures, but specific enough to offer some guidelines for understanding specific behavior. An academic economist, on the other hand, might find a more general level of abstraction useful to model global economic trends. But a prospective transferee facing an overseas assignment needs a fairly specific level of abstraction that contrasts his or her own culture with that of the host country.

For global managers, using cultural generalizations is the best way to combine cross-cultural knowledge with openness to individual differences. This combination of knowledge and openness translates into the strongest climate of respect for diversity, and thus, to competitive advantage.

The Intercultural Skillset

Leveraging Learning with Culture-General Frameworks

The complexity of cultural diversity seems overwhelming. Managers complain that it is impossible for them to know all about the five, or ten, or twenty cultures represented in the groups they supervise. Executives with global leadership responsibility point out that they travel in and out of cultures too quickly to become very knowledgeable. They are right. It is impossible to be an expert in the cultures comprising multicultural workforces, global operations, and international customer bases. Even anthropologists are generally expert in no more than one or two cultures other than their own, and it is their life's work. So how can we have general intercultural competence without specific cultural expertise?

It is one of the great strengths of intercultural relations to have addressed this problem. The key is to use a set of *culture-general frameworks*. These frameworks, derived from anthropology, communication, and other fields of study, provide a general set of cultural contrasts that apply to a wide range of cultures. By identifying where one's own and a particular other culture lies on the continua of contrasts, the user can create a broad picture of the other culture and how it differs from his or her own. It is a relatively simple matter to apply the frameworks to all the cultures with which one has contact. In some cases of light contact, there may be no need for more culture-specific information; the culture-general framework will be sufficient to identify and analyze relevant differences. This is likely to be the case when managing a very diverse multicultural workforce or traveling briefly to many different countries.

These culture-general frameworks are also learning-to-learn techniques, since they call attention to the areas of difference that are most important to consider when first encountering another culture. By initially identifying general cultural differences, a newcomer to the culture can avoid obvious misunderstandings and move more quickly towards learning relevant *culture-specific knowledge*. In this way, the culture-general framework offers an entrée into the culture-specific knowledge that will be necessary to operate effectively over the long run.

It is insufficient to simply know the frameworks. One must use them to identify relevant differences and to analyze potential misunderstanding. Below is a list of the most common culture-general frameworks. For each type of contrast, a particular cross-cultural difference and intercultural interaction is identified. Each interaction is then analyzed to show how the cultural difference could lead to misunderstanding. The examples used are based on cultural generalizations at varying levels of abstraction and of course do not apply to everyone from the cultural groups mentioned.

Language Use. This type of cultural difference is not about the use of different languages. It is obvious when people are speaking different languages, and it is obviously necessary to know at least one language in common. This intercultural framework identifies differences in the social contexting of language. Such contexting is less obvious than the language itself, but knowing it may perhaps be even more important. The contrasts typically include greeting, leave-taking, and other social rituals such as arguing, negotiating, complimenting or criticizing.

For example, *verbal greeting rituals* might be contrasted in terms of length (short to long), general content (impersonal to personal), and style (joking to serious). To contrast European American men's culture with European American women's culture: American men tend to verbalize short greetings in passing, emphasizing impersonal common experience such as sports-viewing, and sometimes using a teasing style. American women are more likely to engage in longer greetings, emphasizing personal relational experience and perhaps including a compliment on each other's appearance.

A potential misunderstanding arising from the above contrast in greeting ritual might go like this: the woman may perceive the man as brusque and unfriendly, and maybe even hostile in his use of "baiting." The man, on the other hand, may perceive the reception of unexpected personal revelations and compliments from the woman as intimate and even flirtatious. These perceptions are likely to be inaccurate, but because they are often unconscious reactions to language use, they are attributed to the character or motivation of the other person rather than to cultural difference. Actions taken on the basis of these misperceptions will probably exacerbate the situation. For instance, the man might feel justified

in flirting back to the woman. In the context of her perception of the man, the woman might find his sexual attention particularly distasteful or even frightening.

Nonverbal behavior. These frames identify differences in the use of voice quality (pitch, tone, etc.), body language such as facial display or gesturing, eye contact patterns, and use of distance or touching in communication. Sometimes use of time (sequential to simultaneous) is included in this category. Even more than the social context of language, nonverbal patterns elicit an unconscious response, and so they are likely to elude simple cultural explanations.

For example, the eye contact frame includes continua for *eye-contact length* (short to long) for use of eyes in *conversational turn taking* (strong to weak). In a cultural contrast between U.S. Americans and people of some northern European countries such as Holland or Germany, Americans tend to make medium-length eye contact before looking away, and they use a longer, direct gaze as a cue for changing speakers. Germans and Dutch people tend to make longer and more direct eye contact, and turn taking is more likely to be cued by looking away.

There are several potential misunderstandings arising from this difference in nonverbal behavior. Many Americans interpret strong eye contact as indicating aggressiveness, depending on the situation. Germans, on the other hand, tend to interpret weaker eye contact as indicating lack of interest or attention. These misinterpretations are likely to be exacerbated by Germans intensifying eye contact in an attempt to engender attention, while Americans may weaken eye contact to reduce the perceived threat. Things may get even worse, since the shifting American eyes send unconscious cues to Germans that it is always their turn to talk, while the steady gaze of Germans sends the same message to Americans. Consequently, both participants in an intercultural interaction may go away convinced that the other was trying to dominate the conversation.

Communication Style. There are several forms of this framework, many of them based on Edward T. Hall's distinction between *high-context* and *low-context* styles.^{xi} High-context styles are ones in which a lot of meaning is derived from the surrounding situation rather than from what is said explicitly. People from cultures in which high-context style is prevalent may have various language use patterns (e.g., they may be very talkative or mostly silent), but they share a reliance on "reading between the lines" to communicate the real meaning. In contrast, people from cultures with a prevalent low-context style rely more on explicit statements to convey meaning. Such people may also be either talkative or relatively silent, but they will usually look to whatever is actually said for the real meaning. On this general continuum, people with Northern European roots tend to use low-context style, as compared to Southern Europeans, South Americans, and a wide range of Asians who are more likely to use higher-context styles.

Misunderstandings along the high/low context continuum are quite common. An American person may wait for a Japanese person to request something explicitly before delivering it, leaving the Japanese to wonder (silently) at American insensitivity and obtuseness. A Japanese person, on the other hand, may create relational confusion by reading unintended meaning into American behavior. In the face of confusion, Americans are likely to become more direct and explicit, which may lead Japanese to become more indirect and circumspect, thus creating a spiral of increasingly incompetent exchanges.

The communication style difference of *intellectual and relational engagement* provides a rich area for misinterpretation between some Americans and people from some European cultures. Many Europeans use intellectual discussion and argument as a way to "get to know" other people and as an indication of interest and engagement. On the other hand, both North and South Americans tend to approach engagement with discussion of common activities or relational issues. For instance, when German participants meet over dinner after a workshop, they are far more likely than Americans to begin the conversation with a disagreement about something said during the day. When first encountering this pattern, the typical American presenter's response is one of defensiveness and "being misunderstood." In a similar situation, Americans would be more likely to begin the conversation with a compliment about the day and comments on some common experience such as having lived in the same country. That conversation might develop quickly into revelations about personal feelings regarding the experience. Germans tend to interpret early compliments as insincere and initial discussion of personal issues as premature. Since Germans do eventually discuss personal issues, and since Americans do eventually disagree with one another, this is really an issue of conversational sequencing. Still, the cultural difference may support enduring misperceptions of Germans as cold and argumentative and of Americans as unctuous and naïve.

Cognitive Style. This framework contrasts patterns of thinking, or how people process perceptions.^{xii} The basic continuum runs from *concrete*, where people use more description and physical metaphor to capture their perceptions, to *abstract*, where people are more likely to use theory and explanation to organize perception. On this continuum, many Asian cultures tend to be concrete, stressing accurate description and direct experience of events. In contrast, many Northern European cultures tend to be abstract, stressing coherent explanation and historical contexting of events. U.S. Americans tend to be midrange on this continuum, stressing action-oriented procedures that are neither particularly accurate nor particularly coherent.

The implications of this difference in perceptual processing are quite extensive. For instance, it can predict what kind of information people of different cultures generally prefer. Regarding any prospective action, Asians are more likely to want information about *who* exactly is involved and *what* exactly they want. Northern Europeans are more likely to want to know *why* the action is anticipated and *when* it was tried before. North Americans are almost exclusively focused on *how* the action will be implemented, including some determination of the probability of success. By the way, Southern Europeans (e.g. Spanish and Italians) and South Americans influenced by Southern Europeans tend to combine European and Asian qualities. Like Asians, they want to know *who* and, like Northern Europeans, they want to know *why*. But once satisfied with the coherence of the general plan and with the credibility of the promulgator, they don't inquire much further about the details, history, or planned implementation.

When the folks described above get together on a project, there are predictable problems in knowledge management. The Asians may want to know what seems to everyone else to be an excessive amount of detail of the project and the participants, while the North Americans just want to get started on the action and learn from their mistakes. The Northern Europeans may be outraged by the idea of making mistakes and insist on assessing the historical record of similar projects, while the Southern Europeans who support the project may be insulted that their credibility is being questioned. Meanwhile, the Asians may have become distrustful of North American claims that turn out to only be partially true (but "within probabilities," according to the Americans), while the Northern Europeans may have become impatient with the Southern Europeans for their over-sensitivity.

Lest we move too quickly to the solution of "better team leadership" for the above snarl, we should note that the cognitive style framework also predicts how the very concept of *leadership* differs among cultures. For instance, many Asian cultures define a good leader as one who is skilled in the direct experience and "vision management" of a wide network of consensual relationships, while many Northern Europeans are more likely to define a good leader as one who is deeply educated and capable of informed strategic analysis. Southern Europeans think a leader is one who can create and maintain strategic collaborations with other leaders and institutions, while many Americans think a good leader is one who can take effective action on the basis of limited information. The use of any one of these leadership styles by itself is likely to exacerbate the other conflicts of cognitive style in a multicultural project team, not to mention in cross-cultural mergers, acquisitions, and other joint ventures.

The intercultural approach to these situations is to stress the ability of any type leader to exercise intercultural competence. That means that he or she is aware of the general contrasts in cultural style, is able to analyze the clashes likely to occur in a particular group, and can intervene with conflict resolution strategies that are culturally flexible, successful in reducing stress and distraction, and effective in increasing creativity and productivity in the team. These skills are generally not acquired without some special training, as is the case with any complex organizational skill.

Cultural Values. This is one of the best-known intercultural frameworks, particularly among Europeans. Given the discussion above about cognitive style, this should not be surprising, since cultural values are the most abstract of the culture-general concepts. Also consistent with the prediction of cognitive style, two popular systems for characterizing cultural value differences have been developed by Europeans.^{xiii}

Cultural values refer to the tendency of a group of people to assign goodness to certain ways of being in the world. For instance, many Westerners think it is good for people to act as individuals, with stress on self-reliance, independent decision-making, and individual achievement. Many Asians place more value on the family or other group, stressing responsibility to others, contextual decision-making, and collective achievement. In addition to this continuum of *individualism/collectivism*, other typical value continua include *time orientation* (learning from the past to planning for the future), *activity*

(letting things happen to making things happen), *social roles* (stressing status difference to stressing role equality), and *tolerance of ambiguity* (low avoidance of uncertainty to high avoidance of uncertainty).

A common misperception between U.S. Americans and people of many other cultures occurs on the value continuum of social roles. Americans tend to be uncomfortable with the overt recognition of role and status differences, even though such differences obviously exist. Ironically, status difference is both recognized and deflated in the common American compliments about high-status people: “She’s really down to earth” (although she’s so high), or “He doesn’t lord it over you” (although he could). Many Asians, Africans, South Americans, and Europeans (that is, everyone else outside of North America) are more comfortable with the acknowledgment of status differences, as indicated by their more frequent use of titles. It should be noted, however, that recognition of status differences does not mean that other people are any more comfortable than are Americans with actual power differences.^{xiv} Americans may mistake the acceptance of status differences as an acceptance of power differences, and be surprised when many Europeans (e.g. French, Germans) reject any attempt by managers or leaders to dominate. Those Europeans, on the other hand, may mistake American rejection of status as an indicator of true egalitarianism, and be surprised or derisive when Americans act in status-conscious ways.

Creating Strategies for Mutual Adaptation

So what can global managers and leaders do with the analysis of cultural interaction? The more impatient (or naïve) tend to ask for some simple guidelines – a list of “dos and don’ts.” Although it may be tempting for managers to ask for and consultants to provide these kinds of tips, it is usually not a good idea. For one thing, people don’t use the lists, anyway. A manager who once told me, “I started to follow the guidelines they (some other consultants) gave me, but my host told me that people here weren’t really like that anymore, so I threw them away.” The first people one meets in another culture are the least likely to be typical members of that culture and therefore, the least likely to respond predictably according to a list of tips. In fact, hosts may make a special effort to comfort visitors with an assurance that any cultural differences they may have heard about are certainly not true, and even if they are true, nobody expects a foreigner to follow the rules, anyway. People are varied in every culture, and no simple list is capable of capturing that variation.

More sophisticated managers are willing to use cultural generalizations carefully to assess each cross-cultural situation. The extent of adaptation necessary will depend on several factors. Is the relationship a guest/host one? If so, then the host may take more responsibility for adapting to the guest, if he or she is familiar with the guest’s culture. If not, then the guest can make the relationship work by adapting more to the host. In these kinds of situations, the general rule is, “Whoever knows the most about the other culture does the most adapting.” This rule seems to work better than, “Whoever has the power to impose his culture, does.” While the latter may seem adequate to busy executives in the short run, it certainly impedes rather than enhances a climate of respect for diversity.

The most common kind of cross-cultural contact occurs when people from different cultures are on the same project team, management task force, or manufacturing group. There is no role relationship to guide who adapts to whom. (Everywhere is Rome). In these cases, everyone needs to take equal responsibility for adapting and the team leader needs to be interculturally competent and able to model these adaptive behaviors. The result of knowledgeable mutual adaptation is that cultural difference becomes primarily an opportunity for synergy, not an obstacle to productivity.^{xv} It creates virtual third cultures throughout the organization.

Developing Intercultural Sensitivity

The third factor in acquiring intercultural competence is the most important. While the mindset and skillset of intercultural competence are necessary, they are insufficient to engender competence without intercultural sensitivity. This kind of sensitivity is not simply a positive attitude toward cultural difference or a desire to relate well to others. Rather, it is the ability to *experience cultural difference*. Such experience is not the natural outcome of cross-cultural contact, as mentioned above. Here is this idea in the words of George Kelley, a constructivist psychologist:

A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them... he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life.^{xvi}

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provides an understanding of how people develop in their ability to construe, and thus to experience, cultural difference. Research on the DMIS over the 30 years since its initial publication has heavily supported the model's basic structure, and it is now forms the core of most intercultural training and education.^{xvii}

The DMIS refers to various perceptual conditions that enable people to experience cultural difference in certain ways. The more complex perceptions of cultural difference people have, the more sophisticated (interculturally sensitive) their experience of the difference can be. In the following sections, each stage of the model and the experience of cultural difference that is enabled at that stage will be described. The implications for organizations when that stage is typical for large numbers of employees will also be summarized at each stage.^{xviii}

The DMIS is divided into two sets of stages, Ethnocentric and Ethnorelative (see Figure 1). In Ethnocentrism, people unconsciously experience their own cultures as "central to reality." They therefore avoid the idea of cultural difference as an implicit or explicit threat to the reality of their own cultural experience. In Ethnorelativism, people consciously recognize that all behavior exists in cultural context, including their own. They recognize the restriction this places on their experience, and they therefore seek out cultural difference as a way of enriching their own experience of reality and as a means to understand others.

Movement through the stages is one-way, for the most part, although sometimes people seem to retreat from later to earlier stages of ethnocentrism. Research on the DMIS shows that people are predominantly in one stage (that is, they have a single predominant experience of cultural difference), even though they may not have completely resolved issues associated with earlier stages of development.

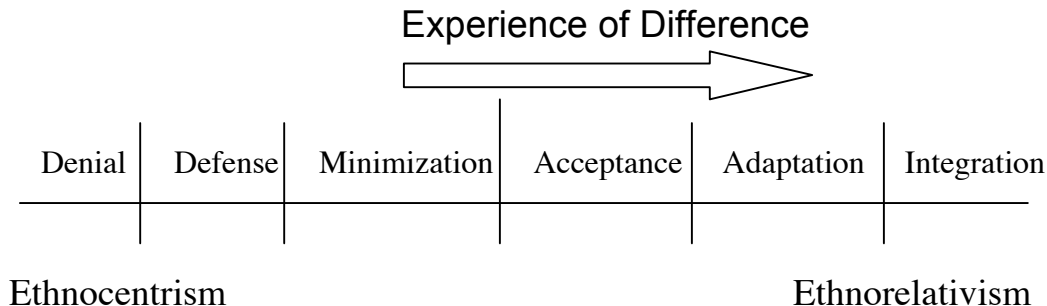


FIGURE 1: DMIS schematic

The Ethnocentric Stages

Denial. In the first stage of Ethnocentrism, Denial, people have not yet constructed the category of "cultural difference." To them, the world is completely their current experience of it, and alternatives to that experience are literally unimaginable. People of other cultures, insofar as they are perceived at all, seem less human, lacking the "real" feelings and thoughts of one's own kind. Cultural strangers exist as simpler forms in the environment to be tolerated, exploited, or eliminated as necessary. This worldview state is the default condition of normal socialization. People can stay in Denial their whole lives, as long as they don't have much contact with cultural difference. They can maintain this state by living in total *isolation* from people who are culturally different or, as is more common, by maintaining *separation* from difference through artificial means such as apartheid.

In most cases, the expression of Denial appears thoughtless, but benign, as in the statement "live and let live." Managers at this stage may appear extremely naïve and make statements such as, "As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem," or "I never experience culture shock." (If

someone travels with this person, the companion may add, “but everyone else around him does!) People may have difficulty differentiating cultures, leading them to lump all Asians, or all Muslims, together. And people at this stage are profoundly unaware of their own cultures. Any inquiry into how their own cultural lenses influence perception is likely to be met with bewilderment. While it is usually benign, Denial can become virulent under some political conditions, where the active dehumanization of others is associated with genocide.

An organization characterized by Denial is basically ignorant about cultural issues, even though it may be quite sophisticated in its technical business. If any preparation for cross-cultural contact is offered at all, it is basic language training. Such organizations caught unawares by political or legal action around race, gender, and immigration issues. There probably is no systematic recruitment of a diverse workforce, and any cultural diversity that does exist is defined as a “problem.” Needless to say, this kind of organization does not have access to cultural diversity as a resource, either internationally or domestically.

Defense. In the second stage of Ethnocentrism, Defense, people have become more adept at perceiving cultural difference. Exposure to media images of other cultures, or the kind of casual contact that occurs in corporate settings may set the stage for this level of experience. Other people still seem less real (i.e., less human) than one’s own kind, but they now exist in perception as stereotypes and so must be dealt with. Because one’s own culture is still experienced as the only true reality, the existence of the other cultures is threatening to that reality. To counter the threat, the world is organized into “us and them” associated with the *denigration* of “them” and the *superiority* of “us.” Occasionally, people at this stage may go into *reversal*, wherein they romanticize an adopted culture and denigrate their own primary socialization (“going native,” or “passing”). On the surface, this may appear to be more interculturally sensitive, but in terms of the dualistic perception characterizing this stage, it is an equivalent kind of Defense.

People with a Defense perceptual condition tend to polarize any discussion of cultural difference. An attempt to contrast cultures in a non-evaluative way may be met with defensive statements, such as “so what do you have against your own country?” Jokes that denigrate other cultures and ethnic slurs are accepted as “normal,” and a lot of attention may be given to the relative intelligence or ability of different cultural groups. Businesspeople at this stage may hold the unexamined view that their own culture’s technology and way of doing business is superior to all others. They may also believe that people of other cultures are incapable of significant achievement on their own terms.

Organizations characterized by Defense may be overconfident or arrogant, leading to mistakes in product design and marketing. Cultural difference is seen as an obstacle to be avoided, and combativeness may damage valuable international partnerships.

Minimization. In the third and final stage of Ethnocentrism, Minimization, the threat of Defense has been resolved by assuming a basic similarity among all human beings. Differences that were threatening in Defense are subsumed into already-existing, familiar categories. These categories are of two types: *physical universalism*, wherein, for instance, all human beings have the same needs; and transcendent *universalism* wherein, for instance, everyone is subject to the same spiritual principles, whether they know it or not. People in Minimization recognize cultural variation in institutions and customs (objective culture) and may be quite interested in those kinds of differences. However, they hold mightily to the idea that beneath these differences beats the heart of a person pretty much like them. Because they are still lacking cultural self-awareness, people in Minimization cannot see that their characterizations of similarity are usually based on their own culture.

People with a Minimization worldview are nice about people from other cultures. They make statements such as “we are all one under the sun,” and they may be sincerely motivated to include cultural diversity into their activities. However, they cannot fathom why people of other cultures might not want to engage in the proffered activities. This stage is associated with various “melting pot” ideas, where a lot of emphasis may be placed on assimilation into the host culture. Politically oriented people at this stage may argue for universal human rights or world capitalism, without reference to how such a position might be perceived by others as a form of cultural imperialism. People of dominant ethnic groups may assume that all people have “equal opportunity,” failing to perceive that institutions fashioned in their own culture’s image may offer them advantages while hindering the achievement of others who are culturally different.

Organizations characterized by Minimization may overstate their sensitivity to diversity issues, claiming to be “tolerant” and “colorblind.” This leads to poor retention of cultural diversity, since people from non-dominant cultural groups often interpret these claims as hypocritical. An extreme emphasis on corporate culture creates strong pressure for culture conformity, creating international antagonisms where the corporate culture clashes with the local culture.

Acceptance. In the first stage of Ethnorelativism, Acceptance, people have discovered their own cultural context, and therefore they can accept the existence of different cultural contexts. People at this stage can construct the culture-general frameworks that allow them to generate a range of relevant cultural contrasts among many cultures. Thus, they are not necessarily experts in one or more specific cultures (although they might also be that); rather, they are adept at identifying how cultural differences in general operate in a wide range of human interactions. Acceptance does not mean agreement—some cultural difference may be judged negatively—but the judgment is not ethnocentric in the sense of withholding equal humanity. People at Acceptance first attain *respect for behavioral differences*, which involves only the more tangible aspects of subjective culture such as language use, nonverbal behavior, communication style, and cognitive style. *Respect for value differences* follows, wherein people experience their own values as but one good way of organizing the ethical dimension of reality. This is not the same as saying “anything goes,” the common allegation lodged by antagonists of cultural relativity. The focus is on the contexting of behavior, not on the acceptance of all behavior as appropriate in all contexts.

People with an Acceptance worldview are able to see their own behavior in cultural context. Consequently, they tend to use self-referential statements such as “As a person with German background, I am inclined to believe that...” or “This may be mainly an American tendency, but...” They are likely to be curious about cultural differences, seeking out information about the subjective cultural behavior and values of other groups and initiating contrasts with their own cultures. In the early form of this stage, managers may overcompensate for their previous ethnocentrism and become overly tolerant of all “cultural” behaviors, even those that are unproductive or deviant in their home cultural contexts.

Organizations characterized by Acceptance are likely to recognize the value of diversity and to make active efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce. Marketing and training efforts may acknowledge the local cultural context, but appropriate action may be unclear. Managers are encouraged to recognize cultural difference, but they are not trained in intercultural skills.

Adaptation. In the second stage of Ethnorelativism, Adaptation, people are able to shift their cultural frames of reference; that is, they are able to look at the world “through different eyes” and intentionally change their behavior to communicate more effectively in another culture. This is a conscious act, necessitating an awareness of one’s own culture and a set of contrasts to the target culture. Shifting cultural frames of reference can be thought of as intercultural *empathy*, which involves temporarily setting aside one’s own worldview assumptions and intentionally taking on a specific, different set of beliefs. The result of employing empathy in an intercultural event is to generate “natural” behavior that is appropriate to the target culture.^{xix} In other words, adaptive behavior emerges from successfully looking at the world from the other culture’s perspective. Note that some culture-specific knowledge is necessary for the shift to occur. When people routinely shift frame of reference, they may become *bicultural* or (in the case of several cultures) *multicultural*. But not all biculturalism is culturally sensitive. In the case of “accidental biculturalism,” people have simply received primary socialization into two cultures. Such people may be able to act appropriately in two different cultural contexts, but they cannot necessarily generalize that ability to a third culture.

People with an Adaptation worldview are able to interpret and evaluate situations from more than one cultural perspective. They are likely to initiate statements such as, “I think a Japanese view of this situation would be...” or “Let’s imagine how a Muslim might react to...” Managers at this stage are often those who seek out contact with cultural difference, and they are notable in their ability to change behavior in different cultural contexts. For example, a manager’s behavior may be more objective and detached from feelings in typical Northern European contexts, while the same person may be more subjective and attached to feelings in typical Latin contexts.

Organizations characterized by Adaptation encourage education training for executives and managers in both the mindset and skillset of intercultural competence. A strong climate of respect for

diversity leads to high retention of diversity in the workforce. Both domestic and international cultural differences are routinely used as resources in multicultural teams.

Integration.

In the last stage of Ethnorelativism, Integration, people extend their ability to perceive events in cultural context to include their own definitions of identity. For these people, the process of shifting cultural perspective becomes a normal part of self, and so identity itself becomes a more fluid notion. One begins to see one's self as "moving around in cultures," no longer completely at the center of any one or combination of cultures. Integration is not necessarily better than Adaptation in most situations demanding intercultural competence, but it is descriptive of a substantial number of non-dominant minority group members, long-term expatriates, "global nomads," and other people who may see themselves as "citizens of the world."

People at Integration are more sophisticated in intercultural ethics (the ability to commit to a course of action in the face of viable alternatives), to be inclined towards deep cross-cultural interpretation, and to be skilled in intercultural mediation. The question "Who are you?" is likely to elicit a very long story, filled with examples of intercultural experience. At this stage, managers may act as cultural liaisons between two cultural groups that they know well. They are perceived as belonging to both groups, which is generally positive, but people who are less interculturally sensitive may perceive dual cultural identity as somehow "disloyal."

Organizations characterized by Integration are truly global. Every policy, issue, and action is examined in its cultural context and assessed for its strengths and limits. There is little emphasis on the ethnic or national identity of the organization, although its cultural roots and influences are recognized.

Conclusion

It should be clear from this discussion that intercultural competence has come a long way from the old days of "sink or swim." The focus is now on developing the learning-to-learn and the mutual adaptation strategies that constitute intercultural competence for both individuals and organizations. The level of intercultural sensitivity of individuals and groups can be ascertained, and interventions can be tailored to the particular issues that need to be resolved. The effectiveness of programs that purport to train intercultural competence can now be rigorously evaluated in reference to an accepted model of development.

In sum, organizations can now be certain that there is a return on investment of resources expended on intercultural education. However, programs in intercultural competence still need to be carefully selected and coordinated to assure their value. For instance, programs should be sequenced so that culture-general information precedes culture-specific information. The intercultural mindset needs to be established before the skillset can be acquired. All programs need to take into account the development stage of prospective participants. Most importantly, the development of intercultural competence must be seen as complex undertaking that demands significant time and resources. The developmental model and methods now exist, but they need to be implemented by professionals with the appropriate expertise.

ⁱⁱ This idea is known as the "contact hypothesis," first suggested by Gordon Allport and used here in an application by Amir, Y., "Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1969, 71, 319-343. See also Barnlund, D., *Communication in a Global Village*. In M. Bennett (2013), *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*: Boston: Intercultural Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Much of the original research on the contact hypothesis is summarized in the chapter, *Groups in situations: Managing cross-cultural contact* in Brislin, R. (1981), *Cross-cultural encounters*. New York: Pergamon Press

^{iv} The idea of learning-to-learn (deutero-learning) can be attributed to Gregory Bateson (1972), *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine, but it is currently used widely in education and business fields.

^v Bennett, M., *Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity*. In M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1993. Current (2016) descriptions of the model are downloadable at www.idrinstitute.org

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- ^{vi} Hammer, M., Bennett, M., & Wiseman, R. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The Intercultural Development Inventory. In R. M. Paige (Guest Ed.). Special issue: Research on Intercultural Development. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27(4), 421–443.
- ^{vii} Moss Kanter, R., *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*. New York: Simon&Schuster, 1995.
- ^{viii} Classic statements of this position can be found in Mendenhall, M. (Ed.), T. Kuhlmann (Ed.), and G. Stahl, *Developing Global Business Leaders: Policies, Processes, and Innovations*. Quorum, 2000. and Rosen, R., P. Digh, M. Singer, and C. Phillips, *Global Literacies: Lessons on Business Leadership and National Cultures*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- ^{ix} Adler, N., *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior, 4th Edition*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Press. 2001.
- ^x A more extensive discussion of “virtual third culture” can be found in the last chapter of Bennett, M. (2013). *Basic concepts of intercultural communication: Paradigms, principles, and practices*. Boston: Intercultural Press
- ^{xi} Hall, E. T., *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday, 1981. For a related, well-developed communication style framework, see Ting-Toomey, S., *Communicating Across Cultures*. New York: Guilford, 1999.
- ^{xii} This idea and other examples of cognitive style, communication style, and cultural values are originally found in Stewart, E. and M. Bennett (1991). *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. A current discussion of cognitive or perceptual style is forthcoming in Bennett, M. (in press). Perceptual style: Cultural variation in the representation of perceptual experience and implications for intercultural training. In D. Landis & D. Bawuk (Eds) *Handbook of Intercultural Training, Fourth Edition*. New York: Sage
- ^{xiii} Hofstede, G & Hofstede, G.J. (2010), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind (Third Edition)*. Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill Book Company Europe. Trompenaars, F. and C. Hampden-Turner (2012), *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business, 3rd Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s system includes some dimensions that others separate into cognitive or communication styles.)
- ^{xiv} Hofstede (ibid) actually rates Americans a bit higher than Germans on his Power Distance Index, a measure of how much people accept power differentials in working situations.
- ^{xv} This idea is brilliantly explored in Hampden-Turner, C. and F. Trompenaars, *Mastering the Infinite Game*. Oxford: Capstone, 1997.
- ^{xvi} Kelly, G., *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, p.73.
- ^{xvii} Bennett, M. Toward Ethnorelativism (ibid). Qualitative research using content analysis methods and quantitative research using the Intercultural Development Inventory™ have supported the existence and sequence of the stages of the DMIS. For more information on supporting research and measurement of intercultural sensitivity, contact the Intercultural Development Research Institute, www.idrinstitute.org
- ^{xviii} Further discussion of implications and developmental inventions can be found in Bennett, J., & Bennett, M. (2004) Developing intercultural sensitivity: An integrative approach to global and domestic diversity. In D. Landis, J. Bennett & M. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training, 3rd Edition* (pp. 147–165). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- ^{xix} Empathic perception and behavior is explored more fully in Bennett, M & Castiglioni, I. Embodied Ethnocentrism and the Feeling of Culture (2004) in D. Landis, J. Bennett & M. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training, 3rd Edition* (pp. 249-265). Thousand Oaks: Sage