THE INSTITUTE OF
LEADERSHIP
& MANAGEMENT

No.44

Respecting Different Cultures

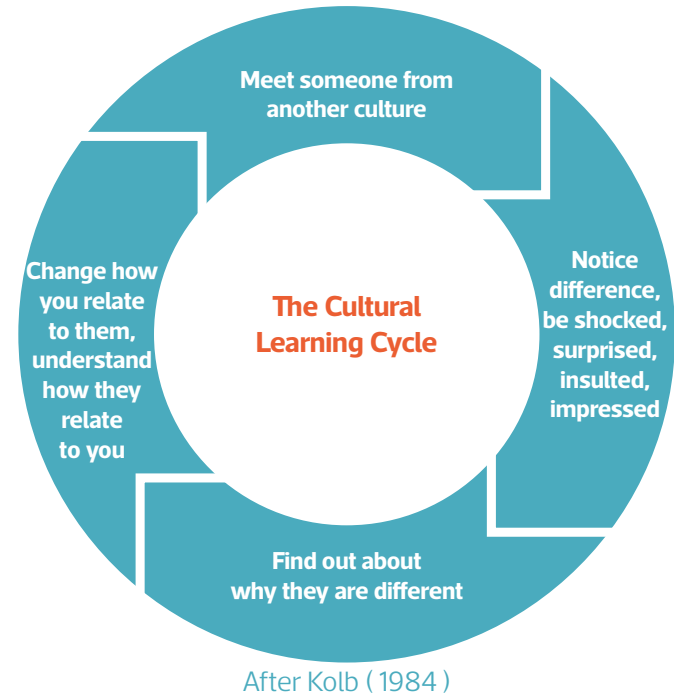A collaborative leader is culturally intelligent and manages diversity

What do we mean by culture?

National culture has specific characteristics such as language, religion, ethnic and racial identity, and cultural history & traditions.

National culture influences family life, education, economic and political structures, and, of course, how we run our organisations. Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined organizational culture as **the way things get done around here**. Schein (1992) included artefacts, values and tacit assumptions in culture highlighting that the values that are spoken about sometimes conflict with the unspoken assumptions. Although differences between ethnic and religious cultures may be most pronounced, organisations vary greatly in their cultures and an understanding of cultural difference offers insight into why organisations can be so different and how culture affects everything.

The Cultural Learning Cycle

We can use Kolb's learning cycle to think about cultural difference and what to do when we meet people from different cultures. Knowing that there are likely to be differences in how we view the world is a good starting point, we should notice differences as different, not better or worse and then find out more about the particular culture. Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (1994) identified seven different dimensions of culture including how different cultures approach the law and their attitude to time. Such insights enable us to understand the difference and adjust our responses accordingly.

The Cultural Learning Cycle

- Meet someone from another culture
- Notice difference, be shocked, surprised, insulted, impressed
- Find out about why they are different
- Change how you relate to them, understand how they relate to you

After Kolb (1984)

Cross-Cultural Management

Everyone brings their own values, beliefs and assumptions to a cross-cultural environment and the way in which you interact with others can reveal more than you expect about your background. This can make cross-cultural interaction challenging and if you don't manage this effectively, it can create barriers and lead to the formation of prejudices.

Barriers to cross-cultural collaboration include:

Verbal Communication	Language differences and the words and phrases that different cultures consider acceptable.
Written communication	The level of formality will be influenced by the employee's cultural background.
Non-verbal communication	Stance, facial expression and gestures, seating arrangements, personal distance, sense of time, dress and pitch or tone of voice.
Approaches to dealing with conflict	The cultural background of some employees will encourage open and upfront discussions to resolve conflict, whilst this may make those from other groups feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed.

Barriers and conflict might also arise as a result of social status, religious beliefs and personal appearance.

The Cross-Cultural Kaleidoscope A Systems Approach

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Different Nations' Structural Preferences

France: Autocratic. To outsiders, the CEO may, on first glance, appear to have a roving, consultative role. But when the facts are in and decisions made, the orders are top-down.

Sweden: Primus inter pares. A generally democratic structure, with the bare minimum of layers. The CEO is a central pivot between different functions, and is highly accessible.

United States: Structured individualism. Upper and middle managers are tasked with significant responsibilities, and often prize their own welfare above that of the wider firm.

Germany: Hierarchy and consensus. A clear and rigorous chain of command is complemented with a genuine desire to convince and win round staff in different departments.

Japan: Ring-sei consensus. Senior executives have an aura of power, but little hands-on involvement. Ideas for new initiatives are often collected from various layers of a firm's personnel, and then filtered up to the top for ratification.

Cultural Differences in the Workplace

As a leader or manager in an increasingly diverse staff team, you will need to work with your employees to ensure that they can effectively communicate with individuals from a range of cultures and understand the benefits diverse teams can bring.

Our cultural background affects the way we view the world and will affect how you lead your team on a day-to-day basis. When leading cross cultural teams it helps to:

• Use a variety of communication methods – for example using written, visual and spoken material to clarify verbal content. This will also help with addressing different ways of learning that are more natural to certain cultural groups.

• Acknowledge other people's opinions and beliefs – it is human nature to make judgements based upon your own beliefs and values. Seeing people from their cultural perspective will allow you to understand more about who they are, rather than how they appear in your cultural context.

• Respond to what is being said and not how it is said - remember that some communication styles you may interpret as rude might just be a feature of the speaker's first language.

• Use inclusive language - avoid slang, colloquialisms and jargon, speak in clear and straightforward sentences, use familiar words and repeat key points if necessary. It is also important to check that the other person has understood your message and to ask for clarification if you are unsure what a speaker means.

• Be aware of unintentional exclusion – in mono-cultural settings, the use of slang, colloquialisms and rapid delivery can build rapport; however this can unintentionally exclude people in a multi-cultural environment.

• Be patient – it is important to remember the challenges that others may face, for example in mentally translating what you are saying into their first language before responding.

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