

The Interculturally-Competent Person

excerpt from the book “Understanding American and German Business Cultures”

Understanding Others

“To understand a particular group of people, one should try to enter, as much as possible, into the historical and cultural context of these people and the country they live in...Now, this is not easy. There is something confusing in all this: a particular incident, which seems obvious to us, is not perceived by the others as the same...To rid oneself of the frustration one feels, it is just enough to think...that the other one has not received the same conditioning as we have and he can not escape his own conditioning. Whatever the future holds for us, each group of people, each country is different from the others...by its ways of observing things, of living and thinking. In order to understand the others, we should use their language, whenever it is possible. I wish to say: not only the totality of the words that form their language, but also the language of their spirit and their heart. It is an absolute necessity. This doesn't consist of only appealing to logic and reason. It consists of an emotional opening to the others.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, from the book “Visit to America”

Over 125 years ago, Jules Verne wrote *Around the World in 80 Days*. At the time of its appearance, the book generated great excitement: travelling around the world in that short a time was considered revolutionary. Today we can travel from N.Y. to Paris on the Concorde in two and a half hours. We can also communicate instantaneously, via telephone or e-mail, from anywhere to anywhere else. Enhancements in communications and transportation allow us immediate contact worldwide, laying the groundwork for globalization.

While these changes may have enriched our lives, they have created complexity. Almost without realizing it, we have shifted into a new mode of living where cross-cultural contact has become a daily occurrence. This is a new phenomenon. Looking back over most of human history, we find that cross-cultural contact has more often than not been characterized by bloodshed, oppression, even genocide. Groups sought similarity, people like themselves. If contact was made with “strangers”, it was usually for reasons of trade or war.

Now we're suddenly expected to live in harmony with other groups. To say that most of us

haven't been prepared is an understatement. Our old habit of protecting our tribe, of living in splendid isolation, has become dysfunctional in the era of globalization. What is called for as we reach the third millennium is cross-cultural sensitivity.

How does this sensitivity come about? Researcher Milton Bennett sees the development of intercultural competence as a sequence of four subjective states.

1. The unconscious assumption that one's own reality is everybody's reality (ethnocentrism).
An example of this is a farmer in Alabama who has never left his hometown.
2. The awareness of cultural differences.
A tourist from Bavaria who visits California for the first time, for example.
3. The open-minded acceptance of cultural differences.
An American student who takes part in an exchange program at the University of Tübingen for a year.
4. The achievement of successful intercultural interaction (ethnorelativism).
A German executive who has lived in New York city for ten years, has American friends and sends his children to an American school.

Once the fourth stage has been attained, one can be described as an interculturally-competent person. But what are the characteristics?

To begin with, the person no longer feels solely attached to his or her original cultural group. He or she has gone beyond the group's value-system and is able to recognize and adapt to other cultural contexts.

The interculturally-competent person doesn't think in ethnocentric terms but is a "cross-cultural swinger", juggling two or more competing value-systems. Such a person is capable of seeing and feeling the relativity of beliefs — there is no absolute standard of "rightness". It's an intellectual and emotional opening to others through which one embraces the change necessary for growth and generally feels free to be different.

In the vast majority of cases, the person speaks more than one language, is not limited to a single linguistic reality. By being open-minded and receptive toward other cultures, a person automatically learns much more about him- or herself.

Ultimately, this is a person who can understand and reconcile the dilemmas of the human condition in different contexts. For example, when an American is confronted with the German need for perfection, it is understood as a real — not a frivolous — concern.

This is not to say that the person has lost his or her values. One always preserves a certain “ethnocentrism”, maintaining certain fundamental attitudes while possessing an “other-culture awareness” (a recognition and acceptance of different values). It’s perfectly natural to remain attached to one’s own cultural group; a person needs a healthy ego based on fundamental attitudes toward life.

For any company to survive, let alone flourish in the future, its perspectives must be global. We are being forced to move from the “nationalistic” mode toward a greater recognition and acceptance of other ways of living. As we can never know a different culture fully, the goal is to raise our sensitivity and reach some degree of cross-cultural comprehension.

If one accepts the premise that globalization is the future, then it is clear corporations must re-engineer their organizational processes and re-equip their personnel with intercultural communication skills. Only through an acceleration of global learning-curves and a broadening of information streambeds will companies obtain a competitive edge in today’s increasingly complex world.

Characteristics of an interculturally-competent person:

- No longer solely attached to original cultural group
- Feels the relativity of values
- Is a “cross-cultural swinger”
- Is usually able to communicate in more than one language
- Can understand human dilemmas in different cultural contexts
- Preserves a certain “ethnocentrism”, while possessing an “other-culture awareness”