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Cultural Intelligence in Organizations

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Successful interaction across cultures requires cultural intelligence. Several aspects of cultural intelligence in organizations are described: suspending judgment until enough information about the other person becomes available; paying attention to the situation; cross-cultural training that increases isomorphic attributions, appropriate affect, and appropriate behaviors; matching personal and organizationally attributes; increasing the probability of appropriate organizational practices.

Keywords: cultural intelligence; cross-cultural training; culture and motivation

Many organizations of the 21st century are multicultural. Products are conceived and designed in one country, produced in perhaps 10 countries, and marketed in more than 100 countries. This reality results in numerous dyadic relationships where the cultures of the two members differ. The difference may be in language, ethnicity, religion, politics, social class, and/or many other attributes. Cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) is required for the two members of the dyad to develop a good working relationship.

Some attributes are especially important to achieve cultural intelligence. Perhaps the most important is the habit to suspend judgment, until enough information becomes available.

SUSPENDING JUDGMENTS

The amount of information that is required to make a correct judgment is often very large. For example, the perceptions and behavior of people in collectivist cultures are different from the perceptions and behavior of people in individualist cultures (Triandis, 1995). Among the most important characteristics of people in collectivist relative to those in individualist cultures is the emphasis on context more than on content. In addition, seeing people as relatively mutable and the environment as relatively immutable; seeing behavior as due to external factors, such as norms and roles, more than due to internal

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20

factors, such as attitudes and personality. In addition, seeing the self as interdependent with in-groups; giving priority to in-group goals rather than to personal goals (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; for a review, see Triandis & Suh, 2002) are also important contrasts. There is now also considerable information about cultural differences in thought patterns (Nisbett, 2003).

To complicate things further, within culture there are individuals who are *idiocentric* (think, feel, and behave similar to people in individualist cultures) as well as individuals who are *allocentric* (similar to people in collectivist cultures).

A culturally intelligent person suspends judgment until information becomes available beyond the ethnicity of the other person because personality attributes such as idiocentrism-allocentrism need to be considered.

Tendencies toward idiocentrism or allocentrism are influenced by many factors. Idiocentrism increases with affluence, when the person has a leadership role, much education, has done much international travel, and has been socially mobile. In addition, it is more likely if the person has migrated to a culture other than the culture of upbringing and has been socialized in a bilateral family (where the mother's and father's relatives were influential). Furthermore, idiocentrism increases when the person has been greatly exposed to the Western mass media, or has been acculturated for years to a Western culture (Triandis & Trafimow, 2001).

Allocentrism is more likely if the person has been financially dependent on some in-group, is of low social class, has had limited education, has done little travel, has been socialized in a unilateral family (e.g., where only the father's family norms are present), is traditionally religious, and has been acculturated to a collectivist culture (Triandis & Trafimow, 2001).

In short, although the culture gives one clue about the probable mean position of a sample of individuals, it indicates little about the particular individual. The culturally intelligent person does not jump to conclusions from only one or two clues but collects much biographical information before making a judgment that the other person is likely to be idiocentric or allocentric.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATIONS

The culturally intelligent person looks for current behavior in different situations to identify the probable location of the other person on the allocentric-idiocentric continuum. While noting the other person's behavior, the culturally intelligent person pays special attention to the situation. Research has shown that allocentrics in collectivist situations are especially

cooperative; however, idiocentrics are not, and no one is very cooperative in individualistic situations (Chatman & Barsade, 1995). Thus the kind of situation in which one is interacting with another person must also be considered.

In addition to suspending judgment and paying attention to situations, the culturally intelligent individual also has the ability to identify the information that is relevant for making a judgment and can integrate this information to make the correct judgment.

TRAINING TO OVERCOME ETHNOCENTRISM

An inescapable reality is that all humans are ethnocentric (Triandis, 1990); that is, they strongly feel that what is “normal” in their culture is or should be normal everywhere. When they see a different set of norms, they are likely to think of the people who have such norms in the most uncomplimentary ways—barbarians, immoral, and so on. Learning to overcome this bias requires a great deal of training because in some sense one goes against “human nature.”

Notice that if one knows only one cultural system it is inevitable that one will be ethnocentric. There is no other way to think of a set of norms that is different from one’s own. Furthermore, humans exhibit the “false consensus effect” (Mullen et al., 1985); that is, if they believe X then they think that the majority of humans also believe X. This effect is extremely difficult to control (Krueger & Clement, 1994).

Overcoming ethnocentrism requires placing oneself in the shoes of members of the other culture. To develop this skill, it may be helpful to expose trainees to very different norms repeatedly, and ask them to think, “Why do these people have these norms?”

I deliberately take an extreme example: Why are there cannibals in some cultures? If there is extreme protein deficiency one can understand why this cultural element develops. People who have this norm readily agree that it is undesirable because it causes them to be extremely vigilant, and to feel under eternal stress. Nevertheless, they are victims of their circumstances.

Learning to put oneself often in the shoes of other cultures can develop a healthy criticism of the norms of one’s own culture as well as an open-minded willingness to see the other culture the way the so-called natives see it.

That does not mean that one approves of all cultures that have different norms. There are cultural traps (Edgerton, 1992) that keep members of cultures from improving their conditions. However, a sympathetic understand-

ing of the other culture can increase the chances of improved interpersonal relationships.

As Earley and Ang (2003) pointed out, cultural intelligence requires cognitive, affective, and behavioral training. For example, cognitive training may include learning to make isomorphic attributions (Triandis, 1975). This can be achieved with culture assimilators (Triandis, 1994, pp. 278-282). In addition, learning to ask questions about the way the host culture cuts the pie of experience is very important. In all cultures, people use categories and attach labels to these categories. However, the way we categorize the world is often very different from culture to culture. The result is that a word often does not have an equivalent term in the other culture. Learning some of the language of the host culture helps identify differences in the way the pie of experience is cut in one's own and in the host culture.

Furthermore, members of different cultures differ in the way they sample information from the environment and in the weights that they give to the information that they sample. Another approach is to participate in various exercises that increase the understanding of culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Pedersen, 2003).

Affect can be trained by being exposed to experiential training (e.g., Paige & Martin, 1996) that can take the form of various experiences. For instance, one Iowa teacher told her students that those who have dark eyes are "better" than those who have blue eyes and for 3 days imposed norms of discrimination commonly found in American society. Then, to give all the students a taste of discrimination, the persons with blue eyes were pronounced to be "better" than those with brown eyes. The experience produced intense emotions. The students realize how distressing it is to be discriminated against and felt sympathy for the victims of discrimination. This changed the life of these students. When they returned to their school 10 years later they were more tolerant of minorities than fellow students who had not had this experience.

Finally, to make a person culturally intelligent requires behavior modification training (Paige & Martin, 1996) to increase the probability of desirable behaviors and decrease the probability of undesirable behaviors. For instance, research shows (Kowner, 2002) that Westerners interacting with Japanese often make them feel low in status. Thus many Japanese avoid interaction with people from the West. A simple behavior such as talking loudly, or putting hands in one's pocket while talking to the other, can be interpreted as a put down. Behavior-shaping techniques (Honig, 1966; Luthans & Kreitner, 1985) can be used to change such behaviors.

TOLERATING DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL ATTRIBUTES

Organizations differ in the extent that they have individualist or collectivist attributes. For example, voluntary organizations, research institutes, and academia are usually quite individualistic. Organizations such as the military, mass production facilities, and jobs requiring behavior according to exact standards are often collectivist. Individuals who are allocentric in individualist organizations or idiocentric in collectivist organizations are countercultural. There is some evidence that individuals who are countercultural are not only dissatisfied with their conditions in life but also highly motivated to change their social environment, by leaving the organization or changing it. Individuals who are countercultural show low job satisfaction and do not engage in behaviors that help the organization, if such behaviors are not mandatory. Persons who are culturally intelligent choose organizations that are culturally compatible with their own personality.

Beyond selecting organizations that are compatible with their personality, people who are culturally intelligent are also more flexible than the average person and thus able to adjust to different organizational environments. This may be especially valuable in a global world where people are selected for overseas assignments more based on technical competence than on other attributes. One may simply not be able to choose the so-called right organization, and one may have to adjust to different organizations in the course of one's career.

CULTURALLY INTELLIGENT ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

In collectivist cultures, more than in individualist cultures, employers tend to select employees based on their in-group membership. As stated earlier, they often make the assumption that individuals are malleable (Heine et al., 2000), ready to fit into groups, so employers do not need to worry too much about employee characteristics prior to employment. When new employees are employed, they will become fine employees. This view is inconsistent with high productivity. Thus, one needs to examine the assumptions that people make and their effects on productivity and discuss unstated assumptions with those who make employee-selection decisions from the point of view of what is optimal in the particular circumstances.

However, we should not jump to the conclusion that because a behavioral pattern is undesirable from the point of view of productivity it is also undesir-

able from every other point of view. While the emphasis on employing in-group members is not optimal from the point of view of productivity, it also has desirable consequences. For example, people in collectivist cultures show more commitment to their organizations (Wasti, 2002), and social loafing is not as extreme as in individualist cultures (Earley, 1989). If loyalty to the organization is important (e.g., because so-called insiders have secret information), this may be a more important aspect of the employment decision than is productivity. In addition, people are more ready to cooperate, and effective leaders are more likely to use warm supportive relationships (Misumi, 1985, Sinha, 1996) when interacting with their subordinates in collectivist than in individualist cultures.

CONCLUSION

The definition of *intelligence* is culture bound. In the West, it is seen as linked to the speed of making correct judgments. In many African cultures, it is linked to the person's behavior conforming to the desires of the elders. Behavior that is considered intelligent in the West is seen as typical of people who are "crazy" by some Native American tribes.

To make a person culturally intelligent requires extensive training. Learning to integrate much information, to look for multiple cues, and to suspend judgments can be very helpful in improving interaction in multicultural organizations. Learning to select organizations so as to avoid countercultural situations is also important. An examination of the positive and negative attributes of own and the other culture can prove very helpful in increasing cultural intelligence.

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