

Cultural Intelligence

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On a morning of July 25th, I was interacting with a friend who was worried about her travel to various countries. She asked me for few suggestions to manage herself on a land with cultural differences. To which I answered, “Very simple”. If we are aware of our own emotions, we would be able to manage cultural differences. In response, she started to bombard me with a lot of questions-

“What is Cultural Intelligence?”

“How is emotional awareness related to management of new cultures?”

To which I answered, it is possible. Let us first learn and understand about Cultural Intelligence

It is defined as someone's ability to adapt successfully and smoothly to a new cultural setting. This means culturally intelligent people accept differences quickly and respond to it smartly. Those who have high cultural intelligence recognize emotions, wants, and needs of people around and communicate in the receptive way. They use this knowledge to interact with empathy with people of different language skills, religion, faith, food habits, and lifestyles and fashion

People with high cultural intelligence may not necessarily be experts in every culture. Rather, they apply observation, respect, empathy, and intelligence to read people and situations. They also demonstrate their openness for new experience and enthusiasm to learn and explore new culture. Based on their

observation they make acceptable decisions about why others are acting as they are. They also use self-awareness to monitor their own actions which keep them informed of their own response to a particular situation. People who are open about communication would not stereotype any culture. They also hold back their opinion when it comes to labeling any behavior or reaction specific to any culture. Instead they observe what is happening, and they adapt their own behavior. It is essential to develop cultural intelligence professionally because:-

First, building cultural intelligence helps us work effectively with people who are different from us culturally. For example, a colleague who is flexible and adaptable towards different culture is comfortable to live in any geographies. This colleague is also admired for openness and agility to recognize differences. He acknowledges difference of opinion around him positively without expressing negative thoughts. He is able to establish rapport with a new team, adjust to a new department, or work well with cross-functional teams.

Secondly, high cultural intelligence is a predictor of strong job performance in a new culture. This means, a person who is aware of cultural differences is equipped to manage conflicts around him/her. Hence increasing productivity for himself and for his team. I am aware of a friend who is adaptable and agile. She takes care of sentiments of her team who are from various different geographies.

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At this juncture, we have learnt the worth of being culturally intelligent. Therefore, it is also crucial to learn the four easy steps to develop cultural intelligence:

1. **Drive:** Drive is your motivation to learn about and adapt to a different culture. People who aren't interested in what shapes a particular culture are unlikely to adapt well to it. For example a colleague shared that when she was posted at China for work assignment for 3 months, she always wanted to come back and yearned to mingle and live with people from her geography. One of her team member made an effort to learn little about Chinese culture and blended well with localites at China. By the end of the day my colleague came back with only few friends and achievements at her project. Whereas her colleague came back with many Chinese friends, achievements at projects and knowledge of Chinese language, culture and history of the country.
2. **Knowledge:** it means learning about how culture in general shapes someone's behavior, values and beliefs. This goes beyond the observable trends about any new culture. The team member of my colleague had a drive to learn and gain knowledge about the Chinese culture which later helped the team member to acknowledge and empathize with the reaction of a Chinese person because she was aware about Chinese culture. She spent a lot of time knowing about the history, politics, social-economic factors and dynamics of that culture.
3. **Strategy:** The "strategy" component of cultural intelligence describes the (often instinctive) planning that you do as a result of being culturally aware. It involves taking what you have learned from being

aware of cultural differences, and making robust, culturally sensitive plans. This is actually quite simple - if you make a habit of thinking about cultural differences and their impacts, they will naturally feed into your planning. A friend who was travelling to South Africa, strategized her travel prior to her journey by reading a little about the core culture of the country/city, specific understanding about traffic/transport and many other things to support her in the land of new culture. This helped her to get mentally prepared to accept the differences.

4. **Action:** The last part of cultural intelligence relates to how you behave, and, in particular, how well you adapt when things don't go according to plan. Cross-cultural interactions won't always go smoothly, so it's helpful to be able to think on your feet, and to stay in control of your emotions. A culturally appropriate action taken in that moment would be an example of a great cultural intelligence. For example, we professionals are expected to dress up in business formals, business casuals and just casuals. But this entirely depends on the culture of the organization and we are expected to take an action accordingly. This would also include the proactive action to explore avenues for networking and ways to develop connect.

My friend thanked me for giving insights on cultural intelligence. She shared, "cultural intelligence is someone's ability to adapt to different cultures and to understand people's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. People can use this information to communicate, collaborate, and negotiate with people from diverse backgrounds. It is not necessarily innate: one can develop each of these components. The final mantra is that it could be improved by enhancing self awareness".