

6.24: What is Cultural Intelligence?

At the core of it, cultural intelligence is your ability to successfully adapt to unfamiliar cultural settings. Peter Earley and Elaine Mosakowski defined cultural intelligence (CI) as the ability to “tease out of a person’s or group’s behavior those features that would be true of all people and all groups, those peculiar to this person or this group, and those that are neither universal nor idiosyncratic.” Earley & Mosakowski (2004), p. 140. Earley et al. wrote that cultural intelligence is not just about learning new cultural situations; it is creating “a new framework for understanding what he or she experiences and sees.” Earley, Ang, & Tan (2006), p. 6. Similarly, David Thomas and Kerr Inkson indicated that cultural intelligence is about

being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, learning more about it from your on-going interactions with it, and gradually reshaping your thinking to be more sympathetic to the culture and your behaviors to be more skilled and appropriate when interacting with others from the culture. Thomas & Inkson, (2003), p. 14.

The idea of cultural intelligence is an immensely useful tool in business. It helps to bring attention to the differences in thought and behaviors due to cultural factors. Consistently practicing cultural intelligence has been known to increase the success of multicultural team performance. Leaders who are culturally intelligent have awareness of how culture contributes to communication and creates shared learning. Darlington (1996), p. 53.

Tuning into Cultural Intelligence

On a business trip to Texas, my colleague, who had never visited the state, was surprised at the amount of “Spanish music” on the radio. Every time she found a music station or station providing information, the speakers and singers spoke in Spanish. She said, “I can’t find any music that I can understand,” and quickly changed to a local station that played top 40 and pop music.

When I suggested that we should try listening to different music and experience the cultural shift between our state and another, she said, “No way. I can’t understand what they’re saying!” I replied, “I can’t either, but it’s a part of the culture here and wouldn’t it be interesting to be like one of the locals?” Her response, “That’s okay. I’ll just stick to what I know.”

Cultural intelligence is like tuning into different stations, being able to adapt to one’s new environment, and, in this case, to the style of music in this region of the United States. Like my colleague, we all have particular stations that we like. Music that is familiar provides us with comfort. Tuning in to the same stations over and over again breeds familiarity with the songs and the types of programming broadcast by the stations. We even program the stations into our car radio so as to know exactly what buttons to push if we want to hear a specific music genre.

When you are in a different city or state, you begin to lose the signals of your favorite stations. Try as you might, the stations often do not come through. What might you do? You could find another station in that state that offers the same music or information that you like. Upon finding it, you might program it so as to not lose the station. However, what if the radio frequencies you encounter pick up limited stations? Like my colleague, you might turn off the radio or change the station back to one that is familiar. Or, like her, you could bring your own MP3 player with your own music.

Similarly, when you are in unfamiliar cultural settings, you realize that the signals you are receiving are vastly different from your own. You are not familiar with what your new surroundings are communicating to you. Your first reaction is to find something familiar, and you look for cues and signs to help you adjust. However, you cannot always rely on what you know and what you can bring with you. Like my co-worker, bringing equipment, like an MP3 player, does not always guarantee successful integration. After many tries, she found out her MP3 player did not work in the rental car; she opted for turning off the radio altogether. In intercultural interactions, the equipment—that is, our skill sets and our knowledge—may not be enough to cope in a new cultural environment. We need to be able to learn how to turn off or reset ourselves to better adapt to the new situation.

This page titled [6.24: What is Cultural Intelligence?](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Anonymous](#).