

Emotional Intelligence and Diversity Series

Intercultural Literacy: Reading Others More Accurately

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Success in our global world requires the ability to understand, get along with and appreciate people who are different from us in meaningful and concrete ways. From obvious aspects such as language differences to more subtle ones such as world view, values and customs, awareness of the impact culture has in shaping behavior is a crucial part of emotional intelligence and professional effectiveness. The good news is that there is both a knowledge and skill base that helps people become more culturally literate. The three areas of **Intercultural Literacy** are: Understanding Cultural Whys Behind Behavior, Seeing the Benefits and Limitations of All Norms and Empathy, Transcending One's Own Perspective.

Understanding Cultural Whys Behind Behavior

Have you ever ...

- Been surprised when a staff member dissolves in tears and seems deeply humiliated when you give what you would consider objective, non-accusing feedback?
- Felt uncomfortable when someone stood too close or talked too loudly?
- Misinterpreted a handshake, touch or facial expression?

If you have encountered any of these you were probably experiencing cultural differences and you might not have known you misinterpreted a behavior. One way to understand culture is to see it as behavioral software, a set of operating rules for how to solve problems, relate to others and survive in social settings. Culture gives us the rules for interacting, from how to address a boss and show gratitude to how to resolve conflict and give feedback. This software also teaches you how to interpret the rules of others. For example, is the person who arrives late seen as inconsiderate, disorganized or operating with a different time orientation? Is the person who does not make eye contact seen as deceitful, under-confident or respectful? Understanding the wide range of cultural norms and preferences and their meanings is a critical element of emotional intelligence in the face of diversity. This aspect of **Intercultural Literacy** expands your knowledge of behaviors and helps you avoid the misunderstandings that can take place when you interpret them solely through your own cultural software. Seeing a wider range of possible

reasons for a particular behavior allows you to investigate beyond your initial reaction so you can “read” the other person and respond more appropriately.

Seeing the Benefits and Limitations of All Norms

Culture is both pervasive and subtle at the same time. It is so much a part of who we are that it is automatic and we don't think much about it. However, the paradox of culture is that since we learn it by osmosis, we don't always know what our culture is—it's just the way things are. A fish does not understand it's in water until it is put on dry land. Being in the ocean feels right. The “oh oh” comes when it bumps up against an environment where it cannot survive. Humans have a similar experience. Your culture is usually unconscious as well until you bump up against those who do things differently and you may feel confused, irritated, uncomfortable, threatened or inadequate.

When you do experience these differences, the typical reaction is rarely curiosity. More often, we become judgmental. Statements like, “I can't trust her. She never looks me in the eye,” or “He's a very aggressive person who always invades my space. He stands way too close,” are not uncommon statements when people don't understand behaviors that underlie cultural norms. Expressing respect in Asian cultures, for example, by not looking someone in the eye is understood when one has knowledge about culture. You may not like that Middle Easterners, for example, stand much closer to one another than most U.S. Americans are comfortable with, but once you know that, you consider that it is a way to feel connected rather than thinking that your space has been invaded.

Seeing the benefits and limitations of all norms requires two behaviors. The first is to understand one's own behavior and assess how it might look from another culture's perspectives. Our famous U.S. American individualism is terrific in fostering creativity, initiative, independence and gumption, amid a host of other favorable outcomes. These same behaviors can also be seen as selfish, domineering, isolating or not being a team player from another culture's perspective.

The second behavior a successful professional needs to master is the ability to find the strength and good news in norms that you don't like. If, for example, a person from Mexico comes to a job interview and greets you with a soft handshake, a culturally literate interviewer will not dismiss this person as a timid and under-confident job applicant. Rather, that interviewer will entertain the possibility that it is culturally influenced and its purpose is to make connection and extend warmth.

Managing emotions well requires reframing not only our own cultural norms to see how they might seem less desirable to others, but also developing mental acuity or gymnastics so you can truly understand and see other possible motivations for the behaviors of others in an open, non-judgmental way. Doing so is, indeed, culturally literate behavior.

Transcending One's Own Perspective: Empathy

Empathy is one of the most important skills of emotional intelligence. It is where the heart and the mind interact to create magic experiences between people. Remember for one moment the sense of connection you felt when, in a moment of distress, someone approached you and showed compassion, empathy and understanding for your sorrow.

Empathy's role in effective communication is age old. You may remember the biblical story of the tower of Babel, the lack of commitment people had toward one another, and their inability to transcend language barriers and create a common bond. You may have been told that different languages created Babel's problem. Looking at it from a different angle, it may have been that their biggest block to communication was less about their different languages than their inability to extend empathy toward one another. Had individuals been able to connect emotionally, the language differences would not have mattered.

Empathy requires you to shift your perspective to one that reflects a willingness to be genuinely receptive to another person. It challenges you to suspend any judgment towards the other and assume a position of curiosity to fully understand the situation at hand by trying to put yourself in the other person's reality. When you truly express your genuine caring for another by being empathic, you can bridge differences and connect in ways that the Tower of Babel engineers never imagined.

To find out more about Emotional Intelligence & Diversity, get the authors' new book, *Emotional Intelligence for Managing Results in a Diverse World* (Davis-Black, 2008) and go to their website; www.EIDI-Results.org.