

Developing a Culturally Competent Workforce

By Kari Heistad, Founder, Creative Concepts

Have you ever watched a group of people in a meeting become so enmeshed in communication challenges that they became virtually paralyzed? They were no longer dealing with the relevant issue at hand but they were captured in the endless cycle of trying to sort out where the other person was coming from. I bet you have and it probably felt like everyone was using a different language to communicate – because they were! Each person was viewing the situation through his or her own cultural identity and just like someone who is wearing blue tinted glasses, they saw the world differently than the person wearing red tinted glasses. The meeting degraded into a blue glasses person trying to convince the red glasses person that what they were seeing was really blue.

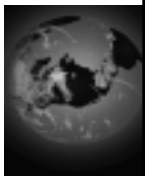
Communication challenges such as these, can happen among any group of people as we all carry with us our own unique cultural identities. They crop up in families, among community groups and particularly in companies where groups need to work together to achieve a company's goals. For businesses, these communication challenges land solidly upon the bottom line of productivity and effectiveness.

If we broaden the definition of cultural identity beyond the restrictive confines of race and nationality to which it has been relegated, we can see that cultural differences can occur between any two people. Everyone has his or her own individual way of viewing the world – one that has been developed through their life experiences. Think about yourself. How have your family, friends, geographical region, hobbies, travel, and education affected your views on the world? Depending upon the situation, they change, adjust, tint, restrict, and expand the way your viewpoint. Ask yourself what assumptions do you have about the work environment, family roles, the people who are your friends that come from your own cultural identity. Have these assumptions and values changed over time? Ask any new parent and they can attest to the fact that the way they viewed the world changed very quickly once they became a parent.

If our cultural identities play such an important role in how we see the world, what are some of the elements (other than nationality and race) that help to color our particular lenses? Some of them are gender, generation, travel, education, family, friends, sports and sexual orientation. It is in the intermixing of these elements that we gain our own unique colored lenses through which we view our world. As we move through life, the priorities and importance of different elements may change, and as they do, the lenses through which we see the world will also change. Important to companies is the fact that that we bring our colored glasses into the workplace where they color all of our interactions and how we complete our tasks on the job.

When we start adding other nationalities to our workplace, the possibilities for cultural identity variations expands tremendously – along with the potential for creative synergies and communication challenges. While the challenges are obvious, the benefits can be seen when two people (red and blue) are able to combine their viewpoints to create purple – a color which broadens the spectrum of both their cultural lenses.





In acknowledging the changing face of the American workplace, it is critical that training programs and initiatives to address these issues broadened their definitions of culture and diversity to include more world viewpoints than what has been used in the past. Concurrently, while expanding the concept of culture, we are also expanding the notion that any two people, no matter where they are from, can have a "cultural moment." These "cultural moments" are more noticeable when interacting with people from other countries. We quite often leap to the assumption that we would not be having this "moment" if we were interacting with someone from our own culture. This assumption may or may not be true, but it is vital that we acknowledge that the daily workplace is overflowing with "cultural moments" even if the workforce lacks ethnic or cultural diversity.

The changing and diverse workforce of 21st century America is coming not only from the hiring and promoting of diverse populations from within our American workforce, but it is also coming from immigrants who are answering the call of the American Dream. And increasingly, American companies, both large and small are depending upon immigrants to provide a thriving workforce as the American population ages. Consider these statistics:

- 10% of the American workforce today is foreign born. By 2020, it could be as high as 20%.
- As the US native population is not replacing itself, 75% of the USA population growth in coming years will come from the annual arrival of 1.5 million immigrants, coupled with 750,000 annual births to immigrant women.
- 12.5% of the Massachusetts population is foreign born (7th in the nation for the total number of immigrants at about 800,000)
- 12.7% of Rhode Island's population is foreign born

The age of the multi-ethnic workplace has arrived squarely on the doorstep of the American economy and it is now demanding to be heard. While immigrants in past years lacked the education and political clout needed to truly impact change, many modern immigrants are arriving with college degrees and are heading straight into the management divisions of America's largest corporations.

Ten years ago, the mantra of Human Resources department became "hire diversity" but now, the challenge for many HR departments is not "hire diversity", but "keep diversity." It is even more challenging to create and maintain a fully integrated workforce that is using its diversity to positively impact the bottom line.

Too little attention is being paid to the concept of helping American workers to learn the new skills in communication, teamwork and management that are critical to the success of today's diverse workforce. The key challenge for those interested in a dynamic and effective workplace is fostering and maintaining effective communication. Too often, without maliciousness, people are blind to how their natural assumption, casual statement or action might impact someone with other cultural understandings. This in turn can result in the loss of quality employees and effectiveness. When you combine that with the increased likelihood of lawsuits, detrimental effects can be seen landing firmly upon the bottom line.

So, what should companies be doing to not just respond but to move progressively towards addressing these issues? How do they draw effectively upon a diverse workforce to gain a leg-up on the competition? They need to be developing programs that foster a culturally competent workforce. Advice for doing this effectively:

1. **Acknowledge:** that culture plays an important role in their company.
2. **Accept:** that cultural differences will occur and they can be healthy. If a dialogue develops people will learn, grow and stretch their minds to consider ideas and colored lenses that they had never thought about before.
3. **Create:** opportunities where people can learn about each other's cultural identities and viewpoints. This could include articles in the company newsletter, country orientations over a brown bag lunch, and training programs that seek to build mutual understanding about cultural identities.
4. **Communicate:** when challenges come up – pause and ask "Are we having a cultural moment?" If you are seeing blue and they are seeing red, admit that you are coming at this from different viewpoints. Ask why they are seeing it from that point of view instead of assuming that they don't know what they are talking about.

More importantly have fun! If we were all alike it would be a very boring world. Plus, in enjoying the creative tensions that come with diverse teams new products are developed, services created and new markets generated. Who knows, it could be the start of a whole new way of seeing the world.

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