

Cultural Agility: Are You in Need of Developing Cross-Cultural Abilities for Your Executives?¹

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‘My dream would be a multicultural society, one that is diverse and where every man, woman, and child are treated equally. I dream of a world where all people of all races work together in harmony.’ — Nelson Mandela

In a world that is becoming more and more global, where businesses and corporations are located across the globe, global thinking and the cross-cultural background becomes not only a prerequisite for executives, but in some cases, a must if you want to succeed in a global business world or advance in your career.

Nowadays, relationships with foreign partners, vendors, clients, contractors, subordinates, and peers often take place a distance away from our current office and location. The thing that will either build a bridge or a barrier in those business relationships is the understanding of our differences in culture, mind-sets, languages, and other areas. Global professionals that hold and develop cultural awareness and agility will be the ones in charge of leading a competitive advantage for the organization they work for to help them to succeed in a global economy.

Global leaders and executives are dealing with a variety of responsibilities such as market expansion, product innovation, successful project delivery, post-acquisition integrations, and many others that demand a range of their technical and functional knowledge and expertise. But when we are talking about multicultural and global backgrounds, they might need to gain some cultural agility to perform and excel in a global environment.

You might be thinking at this point about what cultural agility means and how a person can either acquire or develop it. In this article, I will refer to ways to train in cross-cultural agility so that, with a valid program, any leader can develop a plan to overcome any cross-cultural challenges. We will discuss other ways to acquire a multicultural awareness background as a continuum point to improve those skills.

Cultural Agility

Agility or agile are concepts becoming quite common in our day; it is easy to hear about engineering agile methodology or becoming an agile analyst or agile project manager. Ideas are re-used to give the sense of clarity when one is working in another place. By agility, we are referring to the ability to change the position of one's body rapidly and accurately without losing

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balance. In this fitness example, we can give an idea of what we are discussing here. The ability to change the state of mind without losing balance.

Cultural agility then becomes a competency that enables professionals to perform successfully in cross-cultural situations, according to Caligiuri (2013). This cultural agility works in the same manner as any other physical activity or knowledge acquisition that improves over time. Professionals will develop cultural agility differently accordingly to their careers, orientations, personalities, characteristics, language skills, etc.

Training in Cross-Cultural Abilities

With a well-established, cross-cultural training program, the organization will benefit in supporting and growing leaders in either cultural differences or cultural-specific knowledge. In doing so, the cultural framework will provide a method to sort and store the future information that will be obtained about other cultures. In consequence, the leader will have a developed multicultural structure to face the challenges in a new country or culture.

In the specific knowledge, the behaviors, norms, attitudes, and values of the other culture will be provided to donate context to participants. Another approach to developing such capacities is by a self-discovered learning method, where the participant learns from experience. In this case, leaders are full of the specific knowledge needed to make it easier for them to deal with the new culture.

The last way of learning other cultures is through understanding the adjustment process to identify and be prepared for what might happen and what you might feel when interacting with an unfamiliar culture. When interacting with another culture, the mind will process and adjust to what is new for it. Being prepared for the future adjustment will create an advantage for leaders who know in advance how to react. These approaches are suggestions to help leaders train their knowledge of cultural backgrounds that might be hidden or undeveloped somewhere, and to prepare them for cultural agility—a highly needed skill.

Building a Framework of Cultural Differences

When delivering this type of training, it is relevant to keep in mind that all cross-cultural frames have their roots in anthropology and sociology. This aspect makes it a valid and reliable source of cultural differences for better cultural understanding. The goal is to have a platform for discussion of the cultural differences affecting the global environment, and learn how global professionals gain credibility, communicate efficiently, and collaborate with one another.

In other words, it is not about criticizing, judging, attacking, or confronting others; it is more about mutual comprehension and the subtle differences between cultures.

Gain Culture-Specific Knowledge

In times when executives need to be prepared before going on a business trip, a negotiation, or participating in global team meetings or other cross-cultural situations, they need to be aware of the cultural contexts involved. Having a specific cultural understanding will bring a lot of benefits, not only for the person facing the opportunity but also for the entire organization.

Training in specific knowledge of any culture will bring to the table the context of how any decision could affect the expected outcome. Establishing credibility, building trust, using effective communication, and many other aspects become primordial in order to have a better cross-cultural context interaction in business.

Cross-Cultural Diversity

Discovering the specifics and diversity of others will improve over time as a professional inside the organization finds and internalizes the meaning of distinct behaviors across contexts. Despite personality and specific knowledge regarding culture, this will accelerate the process and help them to discover the nuances of an unfamiliar culture.

Acquiring and understanding cultural diversity gets reduced to a single process, and repeated interactions and observations with people from that culture are helpful. Cross-cultural training in this aspect will provide a structured way to use the discovery method to focus observations, interpret cues, ask the right questions, and, when ready, see the patterns inherent in the culture.

Understanding the Cross-Cultural Adjustment Process

Once the leaders have been trained in cross-cultural differences, diversity, and frameworks, the person possesses a lot of information to deal with. However, a little training over the adjustments will help the person to meet those adjustments better. Changing one's behavior to fit the host culture is different from emotional adjustment and feelings of psychological comfort with the new practice.

It is highly recommended that your organization's cross-cultural training program includes building an understanding of this aspect of the adjustment process. Professionals will realize that a certain amount of psychological discomfort is normal.

Cultural Responses

The process of developing a cross-cultural state of mind and agility in its applicability will be required to make a previous selection; either we adapt, minimize, or integrate the other culture. Cultural adaptation is used at those times when adjusting one's behavior to the norms of the context is critical. Cultural minimization, in contrast, is used at times when one's cultural norms

need to supersede the cultural expectations of others. Cultural integration is used when finding a compromise is most important and well worth the effort. Successful culturally agile professionals are adept at toggling among these three responses.

Other Cross-Cultural Development Experiences

The organization might implement different ways to increase cultural agility besides the formal training already discussed. These experiences, when well performed, will help leaders to maintain their knowledge by practicing, will generate an internal organizational culture for continuous development, and can be implemented at any time to continue what was obtained in the formal training.

These methods are: mentoring or coaching, buddy programs, global project teams, international volunteerism programs (inside or outside the organization), and global rotation programs.

Mentoring or coaching programs are associated with the formal or informal matching of a successful senior manager with an associate who is more junior or less experienced.

Unlike mentoring programs, which are characterized by a hierarchical difference between the mentor and mentee, buddy programs involve the pairing of peers from different countries for knowledge sharing.

With global project teams, there has been an increase in the number of organizations using cross-border, virtual, and global teams composed of members from geographically dispersed units. Participation in transnational groups allows for the development of cross-cultural competencies, including in-depth knowledge about different cultures, ability to form relationships, cross-cultural communication skills, and perspective-taking.

When designed well, these international volunteerism programs can build cross-cultural competencies and create new knowledge about developing markets. International volunteerism can be done with an outside organization or another foreign institution where the executive can acquire knowledge and put it into practice in another multicultural environment.

With global rotational programs and expatriates, international assignments offer plentiful opportunities for employees to gain cultural agility through immersion in host countries. Commonly lasting over one year, international transfers enable employees to live and work in host countries, potentially providing an opportunity for significant and meaningful collaboration with host nationals.

In the End

Global business and interaction is a reality. Organizations are moving into a common practice of interacting with someone that is outside of our current boundaries. Developing skills and abilities

to face challenges that appear when interacting with other cultures will give a competitive advantage over other organizations.

Formal training is one practical way to proceed to standardize common knowledge and common language and is the first step in delivering tools to use in the actual moment. Implementing other steps will guarantee the organization that its investment in training is not going to waste.

Becoming a global, cross-cultural leader begins with an internal attitude; becoming agile is the next step to becoming fluent in multicultural awareness.

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She holds a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in computer science from National University of Mexico (UNAM) in addition to her studies in project management and her Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification, which have helped her to consolidate her career and have a better understanding of what businesses and projects need nowadays. She is a doctoral student in strategic leadership at Regent University, VA, USA; she is a PMI volunteer since 2007, starting in the local Mexico chapter, being Past President. At a global level, she has been part of the Chapter Membership Advisory Group (CMAG), the Board Volunteer Advisory Committee (BVAC), and the Ethical Membership Advisory Group (EMAG).

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