

Professional Resources

Article

Cultural Competency — Is it the third wave of diversity?

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Some people equate awareness of ethnic foods and holidays with "cultural competency." But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Cultural competency and awareness are much more. They involve developing knowledge, sensitivity and understanding of other ethnic, racial, gender identity, and religious groups.

In today's rapidly changing business world, cultural competency is critical. In fact, it has become the "third wave" of diversity thinking—after Affirmative Action and inclusion. (See Sidebar 1). All over the United States, in corporations, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, schools and hospitals, a critical need has developed for employees to understand and be sensitive to their clients' ethnic languages, customs, alternative healing choices, and religious practices, to name just a few of these differences.

Developing "cultural competence" answers this need. When done right, it provides a unique nonjudgmental learning process to illuminate cultural differences and then generate awareness, sensitivity, and useful knowledge.

In my research, I've explored the evolution of field of diversity, since the time of Affirmative Action right up to the current era of globalization. First, I noticed the field is organic and has developed in three basic phases or waves. By organic, I mean that the evolution of diversity has reflected the changing demographics and political and social climate of the U.S. workplace.

These waves are related to the social context of the times.

The first wave was when the field was in its infancy in the mid 1970s. Early diversity training was called sensitivity training and was in response to the changes in workforce demographics prescribed by Affirmative Action. In the first wave the new entrants to the workforce were women and Blacks since they were the focus of the women's and civil rights movements. In the early 1980s, the definition began to become increasingly more inclusive.

The inclusion wave

By the 1990s, the field of diversity had to adjust to the



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Building bridges of understanding and common interest among members

"Diversity is more than simply demographics. It's also about the perspectives we each bring to the table through our unique experiences. Any truly successful organization values diversity, promotes inclusiveness and appreciates the benefits diversity brings to strengthening a community."

*Harry P. Trueheart
Chairman, Nixon Peabody LLP*



changing political climate. The political culture was ushered in the era of political correctness, visible in such attitudes like "don't ask don't tell," and "I was more open to cultural competence than I was at the start of the wave of inclusion."

"Some people equate ethnic foods and holidays with 'cultural awareness.'" seeing and treating everyone the same. In this politically correct environment diversity fatigue set in and the second wave of "inclusion" was born. My opinion then was, "Inclusion brought more people to the table but left out the conversation about privilege and power."

In today's lackluster economy our gaze has turned to the "global marketplace," thus creating a thirst for cultural competence and hence the third wave. Since I have approached this research as a learner, I was more open to cultural competence than I was at the start of the wave of inclusion. I was open to the cultural competence approach because it builds on the wisdom learned during the first two waves and it brings a fresh approach with a lot less baggage.

Awareness of different worldviews

When I am conducting cultural competency training I ask the question, "What is your worldview?" I notice that participants are much more open to that question than when I ask them about their "self awareness." Asking individuals to explore their worldview is an easier way to get people to talk about their beliefs, attitudes and values. This approach brings a much richer conversation to the table and doesn't create as much resistance. I have also found that discussing worldview over self awareness creates more understanding of how individuals are influenced by "pop-culture," politicians and economics. In this way cultural competence allows for a broader context in which to discuss the impact of our perceived or socially constructed human differences.

Differences in social identity groups

Another important aspect of cultural competence is that it asks individuals to notice the differences of individuals and their cultural or social identity groups. You cannot be culturally competent without observing the differences. This breaks through the politically correct notion of seeing and treating everyone the same. I believe that seeing and acknowledging our differences is a giant first step toward becoming more sensitive and inclusive.

Asking individuals to acknowledge that there are meaningful differences between people develops cultural awareness, sensitivity, knowledge and intelligence. What excites me is, now I can also point out there are also meaningful differences by social identity too. I realize that I am sneaking social identity into the cultural competence mix, please understand that I come from an "old-school" diversity worldview. This is how I integrate and assimilate.

Cultural competency usually involves an individual (or organization) internalizing changes in terms of attitudes, behavior and values. Cultural awareness and sensitivity refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people need in order to develop in relation to others. Cultural sensitivity is the knowing that cultural differences exist as well as similarities, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences. Cultural awareness and sensitivity must be supplemented with cultural knowledge.

Definition of cultural knowledge

"Cultural knowledge" is the familiarization with selected cultural

characteristics, history, traditions, values, belief systems and behaviors

of the members of other ethnic groups. Cultural

knowledge is not

stereotyping, it is ongoing learning, understanding and accepting others'

culture, race ethnicity, nationality, religion, customs or belief systems.

Cultural intelligence is a person's capability to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural (or social) diversity. Cultural intelligence is a critical capability that enhances individual and organizational effectiveness. It also enhances interpersonal interactions in a wide range of social contexts.

The elements of cultural intelligence

Cultural intelligence asks individuals to learn about their own culture. Cultural intelligence requires that when you are discussing differences, you "name them" and move from the "high-level" definitions or classifications of social identity such as race (Hispanic, Asian, White and Black) to a more textured understanding of differences based on culture, ethnicity and nationality, such as Columbian, Cambodian, Italian, Haitian, to name just a few.

Cultural intelligence provides insights about an individual's capacity to cope with multicultural situations, engage in cross-cultural interactions, and perform in culturally diverse work groups. Cultural intelligence is an individual capability, which means it is not an aspect of personality or personal interests. It is a set of capabilities that leads to specific outcomes—such as decision making, innovation, performance and adjustment in culturally diverse settings. Cultural intelligence is dynamic capability, which means it is malleable, not fixed, but that it changes from culture to culture based on people's interactions, efforts, and experiences. Restated, you can enhance your cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is not specific to a particular culture. For example, it does not focus on the capability to function effectively in France or in Japan. Instead, it focuses on the more general capability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations, perhaps in France, Japan or anywhere else. Cultural intelligence can even be practiced at home in the United States, for example the cultures of Miami, New Orleans, San Francisco and Philadelphia

are not the same. "Back in the day we used to call this street sense."

In conclusion, cultural competence is a holistic process that begins with awareness, develops sensitivity and knowledge and ends with intelligence. The exciting part about cultural competence for an "old-school" diversity guy like me is, I can now overlay and integrate cultural competence onto social identity learning and create social identity competence, awareness, sensitivity, knowledge and intelligence. It is all about finding the right language to make the invisible visible! By the way, culture is invisible.

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