

Achieving the most effective interpersonal communication—both within an organization and when acting as a representative of one’s own company to outside parties—demands the continuous development and expansion of cultural literacy (Adler, Elmhorst, & Lucas, 2015, p. 48-50). For this reason, greater intercultural competence is a worthwhile goal to strive toward for individual workers, as well as for the organization collectively. Intercultural competence is a knowledgeable understanding of other cultures used to initiate and develop appropriate communication between those cultures (Adler, Elmhorst, & Lucas, 2015, p. 49). At its root, improving intercultural competence means improving situational awareness (Cizer & Lunga, 2015, p. 423). Cultivating that awareness increases the potential for gains in all other areas of interpersonal communication.

## **BACKGROUND**

Building on one’s competency for interacting with other cultures requires active engagement with knowledge sources, conscious attitudinal adjustment, and a capacity to perceive and intelligently manage personal behaviors (Adler et al., 2015, p. 48). Intensive research on intercultural competence has been ongoing for over 25 years (Martin, 2015, p. 6). Despite continued research and ever-increasing relevance of cultural literacy in the workplace as technology advancements push us into an increasingly shared global workspace, an encompassing method of how to best achieve intercultural competence remains elusive (Martin, 2015, p. 7-8).

Still, new studies and activities provide paths and strategies for greater cultural awareness and perspective. One recent study by Cizer and Lungu explored the potential benefits of blending learning techniques in delivering a traditional intercultural competency course curriculum. Another by Elo, Benjowsky, and Numella examines the underlying forces that help to regulate and otherwise act upon intercultural exchanges.

Cizer’s and Lungu’s case provides an excellent stand-in for a high number of other programs designed to increase individuals’ intercultural competence. “Languages are not the only barrier to understanding other people,” the authors argue, “...so are cultures,” (2015, p. 422). While their

course utilizes blended techniques to merge traditional and online coursework, the underpinnings meet traditional expectations for a course in intercultural competence. Participants first receive a primer on the aspects of the communication process (sender/receiver, verbal/non-verbal communication, etc.) before being prompted to consider, investigate, and compare cultural similarities and differences with others from different backgrounds. The scenarios that follow continue the development of this cultural awareness, with questionnaires provided along the way to capture benchmarks and measure progress toward greater mastery of intercultural competence. In short: structured exposure to other cultures is then reinforced through exercises intended to cement understanding of cultures as relative rather than universal (p. 424, 426).

Research by Elo, Benjowsky, and Numella (2015), meanwhile, highlights the potential need to reconsider existing training practices in intercultural practices. By attempting to model and account for outstanding psychological factors that influence overall intercultural competence, the authors found that while existing training may be effective for engaged participants, its reliability in effecting change plummeted when applied to participants unwilling to learn or consider alternative views (Elo et al., 2015, p. 46). The authors also diagram the potential dynamics of an intercultural exchange when accounting for the impact of consistency theory, used in psychology to explain the basic factors that drive individuals (p. 39). When factoring in this psychological principle, more holistic training appears necessary to achieve fuller intercultural competency in less motivated individuals within an organization.

### **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT**

While background reading provides ideals to aim for in meeting the demands of an increasingly shared global community full of individuals and groups from myriad cultural backgrounds, it also provides a short list of the most pressing challenges found in the modern workplace when working to achieve intercultural competence. Even for the willing participants noted by Elo et al., careful guidance and well-thought curriculum are needed to pass through the stages of

intercultural sensitivity from denial, defense and minimization up through acceptance adaptation, and ultimately, integration (Adler et al., 2015, p. 50). Additional constraints beyond moving out of ethnocentrism include learning how to adapt attitude and behaviors not simply to avoid conflict, but also to work towards establishing authentic dialogue and relationships between members of different cultures (Adler et. al, 2015, p. 38, 51-52).

Beyond more global concerns about effective communication between cultures across the globe, it is essential to also remember that co-cultures exist within a specific organization. Different ethnicities, ages, and other social groupings combine to create a huge amount of cultural variety within a single company. Applying this same logic to outside groups, it is then a logical conclusion that while other cultures and organization may seem monolithic or uniform in their shared customs, there too is a wide degree of variability and distinction between the many individuals that make up the “other” organization or culture.

#### **SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES**

While not exhaustive, the following recommendations provides a starting point to building, maintaining and extending individual and organizational cultural competency, in the pursuit of greater overall interpersonal communication.

- Challenge individual workers first to conceptualize different viewpoints borne out of cultural perspectives on their own, then extend those theoretical ideas through Q&A with co-worker(s) from different cultures to form more concrete understanding and examples (Cizer & Lunga, (2015, p. 424).
- Build upon existing gains in cultural awareness by continuing to develop understanding between the same group of participants over an extended period of training. Do not stop the learning process at mere acknowledgement of cultural differences or an appreciation of the value of intercultural competence as a skill.

- During training, distinguish between attained knowledge and actual changes in behavior or attitude (Elo et al., 2015, p. 45). It is not enough to comprehend cultural differences on an intellectual level. Effective intercultural competency derives its greatest power through action and application. Work toward worker buy-in by focusing on how greater cultural literacy can open up new opportunities for the individual and organization (Adler et. al, 2015, p. 50).
- Avoid treating cultures as homogenous or static; each culture contains within it a number of co-cultures, and cultures are comprised of unique persons that do not all share a single unchanging definition of what “their” culture is (Martin, 2015, p. 6).
- Understand that intercultural competence and sensitivity is not entirely rigid or segmented, and that it is an evolving process that requires continued work not only to grow, but also to maintain existing cultural awareness and avoid backsliding.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ample ground remains for advances in both the study and teaching of intercultural competency. The faculty for employing this understanding both theoretically and in day-to-day practice cannot be overstated. As we push on and come into contact with new and different groups of dissimilar backgrounds, the possibility of distraction or destruction escalates quickly. The best kind of interpersonal communication in a diverse society will occur when differences are acknowledged, accepted, and appreciated. It is at that point that people and organizations can move forward together towards achieving their shared goals for the future.

## References

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