



THE ABC'S OF CULTURE:

A Blueprint for Inclusion in a Diverse Environment

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The United States has always been known as the land of immigrants with wave after wave of newcomers arriving each decade. However, getting this disparate group of people to create a common and harmonious community amidst all of the differences is a tall order, indeed.

BOTH ENERGY AND URGENCY

The goal of achieving this understanding is poised with challenges. Groups new to America are intent upon preserving their uniqueness. And in fact, maintaining familiar customs is helpful in easing a difficult transition.

At the same time, we must have a common set of "rules" for living together. This is critical if we are to accomplish this valuable communal experiment. There is both energy and urgency attached to this daunting task as the US strives to be a country that still provides opportunity and fulfills dreams.

A COMMON THREAD

Dealing with this challenge raises many questions. For starters, how is it possible to weave a common thread of understanding among all these different groups with their various needs, practices and priorities? When needs conflict, whose priorities dominate? How do you get those already here and those who are new both of whom are frightened about losing their identity — some because they are new to the culture, others because of the sheer volume of the newcomers — to realize that the increasing number of new entrants to our borders is a great advantage? The place to begin is with an understanding of culture... what it is, how it influences our behavior and how it colors the way we interpret our world.

EXPECTED CODES OF BEHAVIOR

Culture has cleverly been defined as our behavioral *software*: the programming that tells us how to behave. From birth, our family, our community, our religion and countless other influences in effect "program" us with what becomes the expected code of behavior.

DOES A FISH KNOW IT'S IN WATER?

The fact that this code is often informal rather than written as "shoulds" in contract form does not dilute its potency. In fact, the realization that most standards are adopted without question from the time we are young makes them even harder to scrutinize. They are so much a part of us. The proverbial question, "Does a fish know it is in water?" is applicable to our understanding of the impact of culture. The customs and norms are very strong and often deeply embedded.

From early on, culture forms a person's view of how the world operates. This determines what one can expect in life — and impacts everything from having enough food to eat to how much self-determination is reasonable.

THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

To understand the pervasive influence of culture, notice what you usually eat for breakfast. Do you have pancakes or cereal? How about rice and tortillas? How are the elderly treated where you were raised? How are people of title and authority addressed? When greeting people, is a handshake appropriate? What about bowing? How about embracing someone while lightly brushing both their cheeks with your own? What are your customs regarding frequency of bathing and hygiene in general? What is the status of women? What is their role... and their opportunity? Who disciplines the children? What is the role of mother and father in the rearing of those children? Who has more influence in the home and of what nature?

The answers to these, and so many other questions, are a result of culture. It's amazing to study ethnicity and discover the many different (but equally valid) ways there are to eat, live, greet people, communicate, take care of hygiene, and raise children.

WHEN VALUES COLLIDE

It may be no problem to accept other people's "rules" until you bump up against them and you feel your own behavior is impacted or your life style threatened. It becomes especially tough to be open-minded when you feel these other rules are "wrong." When we are rational and honest with ourselves, the only thing that makes them "wrong" is that the rules are different from ours.

THE MELDING PROCESS

Minimizing conflicts when these differences occur is critical. Mega-doses of understanding and tolerance are called for. It is possible to offer that tolerance more generously if we understand the melding process that occurs when different cultures come together.

Think about the company where you work. Are social events ever scheduled without consideration for major holidays or events that might impact some of your staff? For example, planning an important department get-together that falls on Cinco de Mayo, Yom Kippur or Chinese New Year — all holidays where spending time with family is a priority — is insensitive. The message conveyed is that people from different backgrounds are not equally valued. It's hard to

dredge up employee commitment in an environment like that.

Further, when you do bring people together for luncheons, annual celebrations or retreats, do you inquire about their dietary restrictions? Small considerations speak volumes about letting people know that their uniqueness does make a difference and they do count.

One of the most outstanding examples of sensitivity involves a former Director of Nursing at a local hospital. She is an orthodox Jew who went back to school for her Ph.D. When her staff gave her a going-away party, they had it catered by a kosher restaurant. The sensitivity cuts both ways. This nursing director was willing to be the administrator in charge on many Sundays which was the Sabbath for her Christian colleagues. Give-and-take can really work when people are sensitive and willing.

WHEN IN ROME

Going hand in hand with cultural sensitivity is acculturation. The old adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" exists for a reason. Throughout history, outsiders have been faced with the challenge of adapting to the majority culture. Understanding the norms of the dominant culture is just as important as sensitivity to the newcomer's adjustment.

Acculturation is a fancy way of saying that rules exist in every civilization. When you come into an existing group, be mindful of the codes that have been developed over time. Not only is this respectful behavior, it is smart. The dominant culture will be more accommodating if they perceive their culture is valued and partly adopted.

THE FOREIGN INVADER

'Any organization, system or group will usually protect itself from an outsider, who by virtue of his "outsideness" is almost always perceived as threatening. If the dominant culture feels some accommodation from newcomers, energy can be spent learning from one another rather than battling to protect turf.

CASE STUDY: BRIDE CAPTURE

One of the most interesting examples of acculturation involves the Hmong, a tribal group who lived in Southeast Asia. They allied with U.S. troops in Vietnam, and after the war ended, they were relocated to Fresno and parts of Minnesota to keep them safe.

The Hmong have three recognized forms of marriage, one of which is bride capture. In American culture, we would probably call it kidnapping. Since the Hmong women have come to Fresno and become "Americanized," they yell "foul" when bride capture is used. In our litigious society, these women have learned customs quickly. The court system has become their ally in fighting what they think is an undesirable marriage custom. But they only learned that when they acculturated to the norms in their new country.

ETHNOCENTRICITY

Another important concept is ethnocentricity. Every culture believes it has a corner on the market of truth. "My way is the right way" is the essence of ethnocentrism. (Sometimes we act as though it's the only way). Whether we consciously think other cultural norms are *inferior*, or whether we are simply uncomfortable with differences, the end result is the same, inflexibility and rigidity as well as a feeling of superiority.

HOUSEWIFE VS. CAREERWOMAN

How is ethnocentrism shown? The following example, illustrating the critical role of perception, tells the tale. There are cultures, for example, where a woman's role is clearly defined as staying home to raise a family. No career pathing, please. Being seen and not heard is the order of the day. Even in some societies where the extra labor could be helpful financially, there are strong social sanctions against out-of-the-home work.

From one perspective, this custom is superior to that of the career-oriented American woman. It makes life simpler for women and alleviates the tugs of guilt that seem to attack all working mothers at some time or other. It also means the primary caregiver stays at home... there are no latchkey kids in these societies.

Furthermore, the social stigma over the issue of whether or not to work is absent because choice is not available. Those who live in this society might say their culture is an advocate for kids. As they point to our drug and gang problems, they wonder just how advanced and forward-thinking our civilization really is. In their view, we are not attending to the basics.

On the other hand, many American career women are ethnocentric about a culture that encourages self-actualization and the pursuit of one's professional passion.

The idea of being a role model for children is appealing. The career woman thinks she shows her kids the value of self-reliance, and the reality that choices have consequences. Cause and effect thinking (my hard work pays off in personal satisfaction and money) is a big drawing card for the society that advocates career women. Further, the fact that a woman no longer has to depend on her husband for support is a major move forward in the eyes of some.

MORE THAN ONE WAY

As we look at these two viewpoints on the role of women in society, is there a right answer? Absolute not! The most culturally relevant answer is, "It depends." These are just different ways of approaching an issue. But we are all so value-laden that it is difficult not to be judgmental — and therein lies a major problem.

In a recent workshop on cultural diversity, one of the students made a memorable statement that's appropriate here. "It's amazing how often I get my own way, now that I have more than one way." Adapting a flexible mindset breeds tolerance and leads to the next aspect of fostering cultural harmony.

MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Synergism is a "yours, mine and ours" concept. It puts the best of all worlds together to form a creative solution. The idea behind synergy is that no one idea is inherently better... each learns from one another and collectively, they produce a better result. You could say the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

CASE STUDY: THE DOCTOR'S INSTRUCTIONS

A recent example of synergy in action occurred when a Filipino nurse, newly arrived in this country, was hired by a major medical center. She was told to do a procedure by one of the physicians and when he asked if she understood what to do, she nodded, "yes."

When the doctor checked back later, he noticed that the nurse handled the procedure incorrectly. He didn't realize until later that his nurse, in order to "save face" for the doctor, could not admit she had misunderstood his directions.

To overcome what could have become a major problem, they developed the following synergistic solution. After the doctor explained a new procedure, he observed the nurse do it the first time. That way any misunderstandings could be corrected on the spot. No one lost face and each person was able to help the other get the job done successfully.

When cultural sensitivity, acculturation, ethnocentrism and synergism are appropriately understood and handled, then diversity should result in great creativity. There can be another outcome... conflict. However, if you have a group that is willing to be open, to push the boundaries of the expected and accepted behavior, you can use diversity to develop new solutions to old problems. It can be fresh breeze blowing through a stale scene.

As we envision a very changing world we need to expand our cultural knowledge. The new set of lenses we use to see the world can make life more varied, more challenging, and an overall richer experience. The alternative is dismal... conflict, frustration, anger, hate and fear. These outcomes present neither a healthy nor a viable option. But being open to new experiences, to increased understanding for the struggle and needs of others and to the universal striving for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," enables us all to be a little more compassionate and sensitive. Here's to looking at our energized and complex world through a new and improved set of cultural lenses.

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