

Cultural Intelligence

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Industry Article

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There are lots of different types of intelligence. Components can include such things as understanding, learning, use of language, creativity, emotional, and many others. This decade's intelligence emphasis is cultural. Understanding different cultures is something I've always been interested in, but I'm not sure I always exhibited an abundance of cultural intelligence.

Years ago I lived in a South American country, far from my American home. When I first arrived, neighbors brought me welcoming treats ranging from a single mango to elaborate desserts in fancy dishes. After removing the treat, I would wash the plate and return it. Finally someone told me that it was rude to return an empty plate. The custom was to place a return treat on the clean plate. Completely unaware of this custom, I had unintentionally offended my kindly neighbors.

PMs and BAs usually understand that working with team members from different cultures presents unique challenges. Many of us, completely oblivious to a particular custom, find that we have inadvertently offended someone on the team. I once managed a project that included several foreign team members working on the software development phase of a large project. I remember reacting with surprise when a team member told me that in her country she kissed her father-in-law's feet whenever she greeted him. She explained that in her culture this was a sign of respect. This action, which seemed so different from anything I had ever experienced, was the norm for her.

On the same project, another developer rarely completed his assigned tasks on time. When I met with him in a conference room and asked about the missed deadlines, he refused to offer an explanation. During the meeting he appeared uncomfortable, but remained silent. I had mistakenly thought that team members would complete their assigned tasks. It never occurred to me that in some cultures work is completed based on relationships, not simply because the tasks appear on a Gantt chart. I later learned that the conference room meeting had been highly threatening to him, and that he was uncomfortable reporting to a woman.

Culture clashes can occur not just between people of different countries. As a manager I frequently noted what I called the "second company syndrome." Candidates' resumes often showed long tenure at the first company worked and a far shorter one at the second. When asked, candidates often said that they couldn't get used to their new organizations. I heard things like the new organization had "too much process," or "things were so chaotic," or "they're so unfriendly. No one goes out to lunch together," or "everyone expects me to go out to lunch with them when I really want to eat at my desk and get some work done."

There are even cultural clashes between business units within the same organization. I've worked in organizations where "users" clashed with IT and vice versa. In one organization I heard statements like "I'm surprised the elevator doesn't automatically stop on the IT floor because of all the polyester worn there." Or "those dumb users—they don't know how to define their requirements." I think it's important to recognize that there are no "rights" or "wrongs." Although we tend to view "our way as the right way," we need to keep in mind that our ethnocentric perspectives can not only cause bad feelings, but can also hinder our ability to get the necessary work accomplished.

So what is ethnocentrism? It's the "my way is the right way" attitude. It's applying negative judgment to the way others live, work, and worship. We can recognize ethnocentrism when we hear phrases like, "How weird!" or "How can these people live like that!" It's feeling that one's norms are superior to others'. "At my old company we used to write use cases" implies that writing use cases is the best way to discover and document requirements." Or "Our systems were implemented almost without defects at my old company." Or "On my previous team we used to bring treats on Fridays. I don't know what's wrong with this new team—they never seem to want to have any fun."

Related to ethnocentrism is culture shock, which is what happens to most of us when we live abroad for an extended period of time. The cultural differences become so overwhelming that we can become disoriented and distressed. We can't wait to return home to what we view as "normal." I believe that another team member experienced culture shock when she expressed surprise to learn that it is not uncommon for American parents to hug their children. She noted that Americans seemed so cold to her that she couldn't image them expressing affection to one another.

I find it helpful to remember that new team members (from other countries, regions, organizations, or teams) may experience culture shock to a greater or lesser degree. They may miss their families, the camaraderie of previous teams, the HR policies of a previous company, or the weather, scenery, and customs of their home country. I have had team members experience culture shock on my team, but I didn't always recognize it. I sometimes made the mistake of taking their distress personally. My tendency was to withdraw, when exactly the opposite was needed. However, I learned that rarely can we go wrong when we go out of our way to build relationships, listen, and offer support when working with team members from other cultures.

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