



perspectives

The Newsletter Of The Pittsburgh Human Resources Association

Bridging Oceans of *Differences*

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glob·al·i·za·tion (glO-b&-l&-zA-sh&n), *n.*, to make worldwide in scope or application

Globalization is bringing people together from around the world, creating a global economy and work environment. This phenomenon is the result of numerous advances in communications and transportation. Legislation such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the creation of the European Union have also opened borders between countries that for many years served to isolate people and cultures.

Globalization has made possible intercultural contacts on a worldwide scale that we never would have imagined just a few years ago. It also has created the need for increased understanding, appreciation and communication between cultures.

Today's diverse, multicultural workplace has produced numerous human resources issues if you find yourself in situations, for example, where:

- your U.S. company has been bought out by a foreign-owned one;
- you are hiring foreign nationals (very common, especially in Pittsburgh's high tech industry);
- your company is in a joint venture with a foreign firm;
- you are relocating staff members to work in another country—temporarily or long-term;

- you are working with international employees temporarily located at your U.S. site;
- your company buys and/or sells products internationally;
- you are working at a hotel, restaurant or healthcare facility where employees interact with international visitors who have different expectations of customer service;
- you are conducting training programs for people from other countries (culture impacts learning styles and instruction methods).

No matter what your situation, the bottom line is: Dealing with people from other cultures is simply another aspect of diversity, an aspect we do not necessarily think of immediately.

The Impact of Culture

Cross-cultural experts have found that most issues when dealing with people from other cultures – whether it is evaluating job performance, developing business, negotiating contracts or a personal situation – are really underneath it all cultural issues.

Each culture has developed its own set of values, attitudes and beliefs that motivate the way its people behave. These values come from the country's unique history and geography as well as from personal influences on each individual living in that

country. These influences include: Their family, schools attended, friends, religion, political system, media, local community, etc.

Because all of us, no matter what culture we are from, interpret what others do and say through our own set of cultural values, it can result in misinterpreting and misunderstanding one another. So culture has a tremendous impact on how we deal with others, but we're usually not aware of it.

However, when we *are* aware of why people act the way they do, we can learn how to bridge the cultural gap and avoid potential conflict and misunderstandings.

Test your cultural knowledge

Test your cultural knowledge by answering the following True/False question:

All I need to really communicate with someone from another culture is fluency in the language.

The answer is *false*. Speaking the language of the people with whom you are interacting *can* help you make an important personal connection that often only happens when you share the same language. But learning the language is only one step. Understanding, communicating, and working effectively with other cultures requires much more.

Even something as basic as nonverbal body language can be influenced by culture and result in misinterpretation. For example, eye contact has different meanings in different cultures. When I was working in manufacturing plants in Mexico, I noticed that when a supervisor talked to a “line” employee working “on the floor”, the employee generally looked down instead of directly at the supervisor. In Mexico, the subordinate was showing respect and deferring to authority by not making eye contact. If you were interviewing a similar employee for a job in the U.S., such eye contact would often be interpreted as not listening and, perhaps, not interested.

A simple handshake also can be misunderstood between cultures. For U.S. Americans, a firm handshake generally sends the unconscious message that the person is capable and “can do the job.” In many other cultures, what we would consider a weak handshake is more common. For us, the “cold fish” handshake usually suggests the person is weak and may not be able to handle the demands of the job.

Evaluating job performance is another human resources issue that has cultural implications. Because each culture has its own unique values, people from each culture will evaluate job performance by different standards. If you are a U.S. expatriate on a long-term assignment in another country, it is important to know if your job performance will be evaluated by a U.S. American or by a national from the country where you are working.

When you evaluate people from other cultures, the authority issue can come into play again. For example, in some cultures respecting authority means not asking tough questions or disagreeing with others. In U.S. culture, this behavior may seem like lack of confidence or creativity, or an inability to do the job.

Many cultures have a tendency to avoid taking risks or initiative. Employees from such cultures may feel uncomfortable trying something new and taking individual responsibility for it. U.S. employees are generally expected to take the initiative in their job and be accountable for their actions.

Some cultures outside the U.S. also have a totally different concept of time than we do. When U.S. Americans evaluate the job performance of people from these cultures, we may incorrectly perceive them as lazy.

So in the end, interacting with people from different cultures requires more than being able to speak the language fluently. Understanding and accepting the behaviors and attitudes of other cultures is essential for success in the worldwide business arena.