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DEVELOPING CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

In developing cultural intelligence, we need to gain an insight into the cultural patterns of our listeners, because good communication is much more than the fluent expression of our own ideas *Dr Deborah Swallow* explains how being aware of the cultural factors that create “interference” will help you get your message across in the way it was intended. Vitally important to us all, and particularly relevant in dispute resolution, it will also help you build a clear, personal, culturally-intelligent brand as a professional. Skills that will enable practitioners to become recognised as being adept at creating rapport and understanding between those of culturally diverse backgrounds.



Consider this – International criminal law can potentially hold great value by expressing and shaping society’s meanings of right and wrong. A conviction of genocide, for example, sends a message to the offender and the affected community that violence on such a massive scale is wrong – or does it? Unfortunately, the message intended is not always the message understood. The problem with international criminal law is it often assumes the universality of its underlying norms and values. However, this is NOT a valid assumption - and things can go seriously awry if the message is not carefully crafted to the intended audience.

Cultural intelligence is about connecting with the understanding of our listeners, at their level. Hidden cultural differences often cause a great deal of misunderstanding and friction. These differences are a serious problem because they are mostly invisible and inaudible but they affect the true meaning of the messages sent and received by people.

Issues of Language

Language differences are hugely significant. **Language isn’t just how people speak – it is who they are.** Knowing the language gives you an insight into the people. When you learn the language of another people, you notice differences in structure, vocabulary and shades of meaning, and that helps you to understand their outlook.

The English language, for example, has sayings that reflect an efficient, activist driven society: “Actions speak louder than words” and “Time is money”. Americans seem to the rest of the world as THE stereotypical, deadline-driven, money-grabbing nation. Arabs will tend to use the passive voice, e.g. “It was observed ...” instead of “I observed ...” because they are more fatalistic than active in approach to life. Thailand has 12 words for “you”, denoting the importance of seniority. Nepal has different words for “uncle”, according to whether he is the brother of your mother or father, and whether he is older or younger than your parent. Our English language is structured efficiently too: subject – verb – object. Japanese leaves the verb till the end to modify or do away with, depending on the reaction of the listener; the quest being for harmony.

In each case, the national characteristics are revealed in the structure of their language. The significance, however, isn’t just the linguistic differences, but rather the attitudes that lie behind them, and the cultural values that give rise to those attitudes.

What is Culture?

Culture relates to the symbolic dimension of life and society. This symbolic dimension is the place where we are constantly making meaning and enacting our identities. Culture places a series of lenses through which we ‘see’, which colours how we perceive and interpret, where we draw boundaries, and how we distinguish right from wrong. Cultural messages from the groups we belong to give us information about what is meaningful or important, and who we are in the world, and in relation to others – forming our identities. They shape our behaviour and our cultural fit.

Much of what we say, do, and feel is so ingrained in us that we do not realize that cultural conditioning has had a deep effect on because, although cultures are powerful, they are unconscious as we internalise them at a very early age. Cultures permeate our lives and relationships. They eventually determine our behaviour by giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributes, judgments, and ideas of self and others – our values.

The Impact of Culture

According to Michelle LeBaron, a researcher on intractable conflicts, these values affect the way we ‘name, frame, blame, and attempt to tame’ conflicts. Whether there is a conflict at all can be a cultural question - an elderly Chinese man living in Canada indicated he had experienced no conflict at all for over 40 years. Among the possible reasons for his denial was a cultural preference to see the world through lenses of harmony rather than conflict, as encouraged by his Confucian upbringing. It seems that culture is inextricably mixed in cases of conflict, though it does not necessarily cause it.

When differences surface in families, organizations, or communities, culture is always present; shaping perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes. Acknowledging culture and bringing cultural intelligence to conflicts can help all kinds of people make more intentional, adaptive choices.

Culture and the Law

Taming conflict varies across cultures and shapes the way society deals with it. In other words, we operationalise culture based on our societal values. In Britain, where our core value is ‘fair play’ (with implied equality), our system of law is adversarial and about winning through argument. For this to happen, we all need to be equal in the eyes of the law. Likewise in the United States; but that, and their extreme competitiveness shape their need for harsh sanctions and punishments

In the Nordic countries, whose core values are equality and irenics (unifying difference), the law is based on consultation, mediation and compromise, and is part of the civil code which is meant to be educative rather than punitive. Laws are designed to give a moral lead rather than to coerce. Punishments are designed not to offend dignity. This removes particularly physical punishments and sanctions causing psychological harm, and instead punishments are mostly based on community service and fines, with prison sentences being perceived as harmful. Russians, on the other hand, believe compromise is for the very weak, but reach agreement if it can be proven the other side has struggled very hard and will make the first concession.

In Britain and the United States, we are so used to the concept of ‘Innocent Until Proven Guilty’ that most of us would find it impossible to live under a judicial system where the burden of proof is upon the defendant, and not upon the State. Yet this is what happens in Italy, as witnessed by the recent court case (where an American student was found guilty of killing her colleague) which had American society crying “foul”. France still lives by “The Code Napoleon” which has little belief in

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negotiation or compromise because, in its view, concessions tend to lead to loss of power and status – prestige can be best served by taking a conflictual stand. Hispanics view law as an expression of the ideal, almost a work of art, which may be admired and appreciated but which does not necessarily apply to them personally.

In many cultures emotion is not merely recognised, it is used as an indication of integrity. In the Middle East, what one says in front of the court is more important than what has been written down. The Maoris believe that speech is meant to be from the heart rather than in a more prepared way from the head where facts may be more carefully contrived.

In the Arab world, Asia and Africa, where much value is placed on saving face, a third party is used as a go-between. This will either be a traditional elder, revered for his wisdom, knowledge and relationships, or someone known to the parties who is familiar with the history of the situation and the webs of relationships. Even President Kennedy acknowledged, in his memoirs, “Don’t humiliate your opponent,” which is, of course, a central face issue. Third parties may use different strategies with quite different goals, depending on their cultural sense of what is needed. In these cultures, gaining or restoring face is as important as avoiding loss of face.

Cultures Create Standpoints

Different approaches to meaning-making result in people developing differing world views. Inner-directed people (North Americans, Northern Europeans & Anglo cultures) are ‘masters of their fate’ and ‘captains of their souls’ – they are outcome focused and believe they can control their destinies. Outer-directed people (Africans, Arabs, Asians, South Americans, Southern Europeans) are fatalistic; paying attention to the process not the outcome; nurturing relationships, living in harmony with nature, going with the flow. They can’t hurry for anything and frustrate those who are deadline driven.

Inner-directed cultures are also individualistic, valuing: competition, confrontation, independence, personal achievement, self-reliance, self-development and fulfilment. Outer-directed cultures are group-minded, valuing: co-operation, harmony and cohesion, filial piety (respect for and deference toward elders), teamwork, reputation of the group, and interdependence. Thus, the Japanese perceive our culture’s individualism as immaturity; our unseemly behaviour as rude; and, our ‘no holds barred’ approach to challenge and confrontation would bring dishonour and face-loss in their culture.

Conclusion

Developing cultural intelligence is a core competence for anyone who is involved with resolving disputes. It enables you to better disentangle and manage multilayered nets of

complexity which otherwise would be seen through your own limiting cultural lenses.

Cultural intelligence involves recognizing and acting respectfully from the knowledge that each culture has a different symbolic dimension: approaches to meaning-making; communication patterns; and ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict – based on how we relate to people, to rules and authority, to time and to our environment. Only when we understand how our listeners interpret these can we shape our message in a way that can be received and understood in the way it was intended. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to conflict resolution. Culture is always a factor.

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