

What Is Intercultural Consulting?

An introduction to the origins, purposes,
and methods of intercultural work.

Cornelius Grove & Willa Hallowell

GROVEWELL LLC

Anyone may use this article; no copyright is claimed. Please attribute the publisher as GROVEWELL LLC and year as 2002.

Intercultural consulting is delivery to a client of skills that enable people to quickly become more professionally productive and interpersonally effective when working in an unfamiliar culture, or when working anywhere with others who are from an unfamiliar culture.

Intercultural skills are increasingly being viewed as indispensable by globalizing businesses. . .and by diplomatic corps, educational institutions, military services, people-to-people exchange groups, missionary societies, NGOs, and many other organizations with international scopes of activity.

Origins of the Intercultural Field

The intercultural field arose during the 1950s out of two themes, one broad and public, the other focused and professional.

The broad, public theme arose from the terrible memory of WWII and the Holocaust; this was concern about hate and violence between religions, ethnic, tribal, national, and cultural groups. Intellectually, this theme is best represented by Gordon Allport's widely praised book, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954).

The focused, professional theme was fascination with cultural (group-level) differences in behavior, and a related interest in the adaptation challenges faced by a person from one group who comes into sustained contact with another group. This was first addressed by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* (1959), which described human differences in nonverbal behavior. This nascent research interest soon came face-to-face with a real-world challenge.

The Peace Corps

The U.S. Peace Corps was founded in 1961. When fledgling Peace Corps volunteers entered villages abroad, most encountered unexpected difficulties. Many failed. The question posed by officials as well as by the humiliated volunteers was, "Could this failure have been prevented?"

Social scientists who studied the failures soon revealed the problem: differences in *values* between human groups. For example, they found that values such as "progress" and "equal opportunity," which motivated the Peace Corps and its volunteers, were not shared by many on the receiving end. The Americans, projecting their culture's values, imagined that poor villagers would grasp the

worth of, say, an irrigation system. But some villagers had no expectation that life could or should improve. Their polite non-cooperation defeated many well-meaning volunteers.

As the practical impact of group-level value and behavior differences came to be better understood, training methods were developed. These were put to use for future generations of Peace Corps volunteers, whose abilities to work abroad greatly improved.

After Peace Corps volunteers failed, the weight of their employer, the U.S. government, had been thrown behind the search for solutions. Thus, the intercultural field was able to get off to a secure start during the 1960s. Established academic disciplines contributed to this effort.

Antecedent Disciplines

Cultural anthropology is the intercultural field's chief antecedent discipline. Early anthropologists studied one cultural group at a time — the Trobriand Islanders, for example — in great depth and detail. Some current anthropologists continue this work, while others compare a variety of cultures in order to gain deeper understanding of the role of culture in human affairs. The findings of anthropologists add to the store of academic knowledge that humans have about themselves; more and more practical applications are being found for this knowledge as well.

Interculturalists study what happens when members of one cultural group interact with members of another. The purpose of this research is primarily practical: to discover and apply techniques for enabling people to adapt more readily to an unfamiliar set of values, mindsets, and patterns of behavior. The intercultural field sometimes is explained as being a type of applied anthropology.

Psychology is the intercultural field's other antecedent discipline. Over the past decades, many interculturalists have been, and still are, initially trained as psychologists. Practicing psychologists increasingly are drawn to intercultural research because, in their efforts to treat the ills of the human psyche, they've come to recognize the vast extent to which individuals are influenced by the values and behaviors shared by the members of the group in which they were raised. When a psychologist works with a patient whose native culture differs from that of his or her current community, knowledge of intercultural research findings become indispensable.

Sociology, linguistics, communication, and social work are among the other disciplines that have made significant contributions to the intercultural field.

Two Common Misperceptions

Two misperceptions undermine intercultural consultants' ability to be effective:

The first is that the intercultural field is merely academic and has nothing to contribute to the rough-and-tumble of business dealings and other features of "real life." This is false. The commitment of intercultural researchers consistently has been to develop *applied* solutions. They are dedicated to better enabling all those who work across boundaries — businesspeople,

diplomats, educators, refugees, missionaries, soldiers, exchange students, and the family members of all of these — to be more readily successful at communicating and interacting with people from cultural backgrounds that differ from their own. Among other things, this means that they will be more effective in terms of getting useful work done and building trusting relationships.

True, some interculturalists are academics. Their research, like that of other social scientists, leads to hypotheses that are tested and revised on their way to becoming theories. People attain doctorates in intercultural communication; well-known, prestigious universities are among those granting these advanced degrees. Learned books and refereed journals in this field, many brought to market by mainstream publishing houses in the U.S. and abroad, now number in the hundreds.

The second common misperception is that intercultural work merely is about etiquette and acting agreeably in polite company. "Give and receive business cards with both hands in Japan," for example. Yes, it's true that do-and-don't rules of this type turn up in even the most sophisticated intercultural training and consulting. But do-and-don't rules represent a tiny fraction of what the intercultural field is all about.

What Do Intercultural Professionals Do?

People who make a career in the intercultural field variously devote their energies to. . .

- carrying out social scientific research to reveal the assumptions, values, mindsets, and patterns of emotion and behavior that characterize various human groups ("cultures");
- showing how these factors influence behaviors in the daily life and work of group members;
- creating conceptual frameworks for describing, and for comparing and contrasting, these factors and behaviors — and doing this in terms understandable by non-specialists;
- understanding the process of adaptation that occurs (or fails to occur) when a person crosses some type of boundary to take up daily life among culturally different others; and
- developing methods — training, coaching, consulting, etc. — to help others learn and apply skills that lead quickly to successful adaptation and thereby to professional success and personal fulfillment in an unfamiliar culture or among others from an unfamiliar culture.

Interculturalists understand that the observable behaviors of any human being arise from multiple influences. Some of these are unique to the individual ("personality"). Others are shared by the individual with the members of the primary groups to which he or she belongs: caste, clan, family, community, religion, occupation, socioeconomic level, ethnicity, and nationality ("culture"). The passion of interculturalists is to understand the *cultural* influences on human behavior.

Interculturalists are keenly aware of the dangers of stereotyping. They do everything in their power to develop valid generalizations about central tendencies in group-level behavior.

Interculturalists identify the *patterns* in group-level behavior. They create conceptual frameworks to explain the assumptions, values, and mindsets that lead to the repeated occurrence of those patterns. Interculturalists develop easily applied ways to think and talk about the motivational wellsprings of group-level behavior, and to compare and contrast the behaviors of different human groups. This prepares interculturalists to apply their knowledge for the benefit of anyone who is immersed, or soon will be, in daily life and work among members of an unfamiliar culture.

What interculturalists do can be summarized as follows: Interculturalists. . .

- are dedicated to understanding patterns of human behavior at the group (cultural) level;
- go beyond description to probe the assumptions and values that engender those patterns;
- develop ways to compare and contrast the patterned behaviors of different groups;
- focus also on the process of adaptation when people live and work in a new culture;
- try to express their knowledge in terms readily understood by non-specialists; and
- use their knowledge to help others develop skills for working productively in a different culture, or for working in their home culture with people who are culturally different.

What Is Intercultural Consulting?

Intercultural consulting is the delivery to a client of the knowledge and skills amassed by people in the intercultural field during the past 50+ years. "Consulting" here comprises a wide range of possible methods for bringing benefits directly to clients: training, coaching, advising, facilitating, educating, developing, revising, strategizing, organizing, planning, representing. . . .

GROVEWELL'S website — Grovewell.com — provides numerous examples of the ways in which intercultural consultants are able to provide useful services to client companies and organizations.

This article is available at WillaHallowellCoaching.com/knowledge-center/intercultural-consulting/