Blog

Adapting to Difference: The GIST of It, Part 1

Catalyzing

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Diversity in the workplace should not be limited to gender; rather, it should envelop all aspects of a person, including his or her race, culture, and national identity. Understanding these other dimensions of diversity—and how they can impact business and working relationships—is the goal of Catalyst's Global Issues Specialty Team (GIST).

Catalyst members—and many of our Award winners—are multinational companies with employees in hundreds of countries who often work on cross-cultural teams and across borders. This is why the GIST seeks to engage and include women and men from a diversity of cultures.

Why are we running the GIST series as we take a closer look at "Hot Jobs" this month? Because the people who land a company's "hot jobs" are those who can work effectively within different cultural and geographic contexts.

In the first blog in our three-part series on Catalyst's GIST, we've invited three renowned cross-cultural experts to discuss challenges common to those who work across borders.

What are the biggest challenges that a business manager faces when working in another culture or country? What characteristics lead to success for those working in other cultures?

Cornelius N. Grove & Willa Z. Hallowell are the partners of GROVEWELL LLC, which provides global leadership development through coaching for individuals and teams as well as training, facilitation, and strategic consulting services to individuals and business units in the global marketplace.

The biggest challenge isn't within the other culture; it's within the manager. That challenge is *to become conscious of, and to overcome*, her assumption that "all people everywhere are similar," or "people are people," or "all humans really want the same things." This "assumption of similarity," as it is known, was formed in her home community beginning in earliest childhood and became part of the mindset she took into adult life and work. This assumption underlies the common belief that "cross-cultural differences" refers to superficial characteristics of etiquette, taste, and style. While this view isn't 100 percent wrong, it's highly misleading.

For example, in Latin cultures, work gets done but the key goal of interactions is a relationship that is distinctly harmonious; colleagues strive to be perceived by others as warmly caring or *simpático*. In United States culture, the key goal of interactions is getting work done efficiently; if harmony and caring also reign, that's great, but it's rarely a "must-have." With this in mind, imagine the misunderstandings that can arise when Latin and United States colleagues collaborate on a long-term basis.

This example demonstrates that the biggest challenges a business manager faces are not readily observable in the manner of etiquette, taste, and style. The biggest challenges are nuanced cross-cultural differences in core values, types of emotional expression, relationship patterns, what constitutes trust, etc. In the workplace, the key challenges are expectations about decision-making, problem-solving, initiative-taking, hierarchy, time-use, and what it means to be part of a team.

To help managers gain the ability to work abroad, we focus on enabling them to overcome the assumption of similarity, then to learn to clearly perceive the nuanced differences. We then strengthen managerial competencies such as increasing awareness of one's own feelings and becoming more responsive to those of others – feelings that are usually culturally shaped. Taking an inquiring stance towards ambiguity and learning to maintain a non-judgmental attitude while dealing with the differences are core competencies for all global business people.

Adapting to Difference: The GIST of It, Part 2

How can one consider and practice cross-cultural awareness in one's home country when working with clients and colleagues from other countries?

As we mentioned in our first post, the challenge for the manager in this situation is less about the details of the clients and colleagues from other countries, more about *the mindset and assumptions that she brings to her interactions with them*. Corporate people from various cultures who interact with one another do share *some* characteristics, which at first seems to validate an assumption of sameness. That assumption also gets validation from Diversity Days—the food-crafts-music kind—which highlight aspects of culture that have little to do with relationship patterns and core values. Like a cake's frosting, Diversity Days are enjoyable but not substantial.

If one intends to practice cross-cultural awareness at home, then our prescription is that one become and remain curious about colleagues and clients from abroad. Don't just focus on *what* they do; focus on *when*, *where*, *why*, *with whom*, and especially *how* they do it.

Take, for example, close relationships. People everywhere—including people in places of work—need to feel emotionally closer with a few acquaintances than they do with many others (that's the *what*, universally shared). But *with whom* may I become close…and with whom must I *not* become close? *How* do I establish a close relationship? *Where* may our closeness be demonstrated…and where not? These are examples of nuances of daily behavior that are guided by an employee's cultural background—whether she is from India, China, Sweden, or Brazil. If you have a colleague from another culture, gently inquire about his or her beliefs and behaviors in this respect.

Another example is first-generation Asians working in the United States, who may not be comfortable communicating openly with their superiors in a public forum such as a meeting. While this behavior may appear reticent, elusive, or withholding to their American colleagues, a cross-culturally adept manager will not rush to negatively judge her Asian colleagues' behavior, but will focus on noticing behavior patterns—*when* and *with whom* is this "reticence" apparent—then be curious about what might be behind this behavioral pattern.

Your curiosity must be persistent enough to take you into the other person's universe. Visit one another's homes; get to know relatives and friends. Attend foreign films. Discuss fiction from one another's cultures as well as nonfictional cultural analyses.

Cultural *self*-awareness is key: awareness of *yourself* as a bearer of culturally derived assumptions, values, and expectations. That, together with curiosity about the cultures of clients and colleagues from abroad, will take you far.

http://www.catalyst.org/blog/catalyzing/crossing-cultures-gist-it-part-2

Adapting to Difference: The GIST of It, Part 3

What considerations and adjustments should a company keep in mind to successfully acknowledge, adapt, and leverage diversity programs (including networks, mentoring/sponsorship, and leadership training) in regions outside of its home country?

This question is grounded in the assumption that, if we consider how best to adjust our "home culture" approaches, then our diversity programs will be embraced in other regions, leading to the changes that we deem desirable.

Is this thinking occurring only in the headquarters' nation? It appears that the recipients of our desired changes have no voice. Isn't all this effort about diversity *and inclusion*?

Diversity programs exported to other countries entail two dilemmas. The first is *ethical*. Diversity programs advocate respect and tolerance for the values and ways of life of others. But consider this: people in other countries and cultures have time-honored ways of managing intergroup relationships. These traditions arise from unique historical contexts, yielding behaviors toward subgroups that authentically express local norms and values.

What are *we* advocating? We're advocating that *everyone* show respect and tolerance for local norms and values. Does "everyone" include us? Apparently not. For if "everyone" included us, we'd be role-modeling respect and tolerance instead of being bearers of change for distant others via our home-grown diversity programs.

The second dilemma is *practical*. Diversity programs are grounded not only on the assumption that they are morally good, but also on the assumption that they lead to improvements in overseas productivity. But this is not necessarily the case. Urging people to make fundamental changes in the deep norms and values shared within their societies, and in their daily behavior, is at least as likely to be profoundly upsetting as it is to be a productivity enhancer. What often happens among some target groups abroad is that employees go through the motions of acquiescing…but in the end, few deep values or behaviors are transformed.

Two questions to ask ourselves: what would "diversity and inclusion" look like if it were to encompass *our* respecting other people's solutions to their internal relationship issues? And what would be *our* reaction if representatives from a distant country came here and began instructing us on how to improve *our* relationship patterns?

For an extended exploration of these matters, please read our paper on [globalizing diversity](http://www.catalyst.org/blog/catalyzing/crossing-cultures-gist-it-part-3).