

Cultural Flexibility, Why You Need It

When most of us hear of culture and diversity we think of foreign countries far from the predictable environment around us. Strange food, languages, and customs where only an encyclopedia would be helpful to navigate. While that still applies in some cases, the reality is very different. The playing field is changing with a growing global market that allows companies and individuals to compete from virtually anywhere. In turn, this means that we can reach customers and prospective employees in this same global market. Ultimately, the implication is that cultural flexibility is not an option anymore. However, we are not just talking about global transitions here. What about on a smaller scale? It is safe to say that some of your working relationships, whether with coworkers or customers, are cross cultural. It does not have to be so drastic: one of you could have grown up in a big city while your coworker on a farm. Or in another case you move from one corporation to another and things are just done in a different way. That is culture too.

What we are saying is this, you are faced with cultural challenges almost daily and in order to be successful you have to find a way to overcome these challenges. Much easier said than done, right? We have some tips for you get a jump start on excelling at cultural transitions.

1. Attitude determines outcome

The mindset in which you approach a situation is essential. If you have preconceived ideas and expectations of what a culture is like, they will interfere with your success. We are not saying to be unprepared, but just because you read that the Italians value social interactions more than efficiency doesn't mean that every Italian will fall in that category. Or if you do business in Great Britain and assume that just because you speak the same language, their customs will be identical. In fact, according to Erin Meyer's book, *The Culture Map* (2014), Americans often fail in cultural transitions with the British because they assume business relations are the same. We recommend keeping your assumptions and expectations to a minimum.

2. Open up

The next recommendation is to open up and take part in customs of the foreign culture. It is better to dive right in and treat it as an experience rather than easing into it. When you participate, attempt to be fully present and engage with the individuals you are interacting with. Not only will this help your cultural transition but it will help you form better and more productive relationships.

3. Practice Language

Another piece of advice to increase your probability of success in bridging cultural boundaries in business relations is to embrace language. In the beginning it can make you feel unintelligent and overwhelmed, but it has both short term and long term gains. Short term, it shows your cultural counterpart that you are making an effort and willing to understand their ways. The long term advantages however, are many and will allow you to develop successful relationships in a diverse cultural landscape. Individual growth, precedence for future language development, and increase in efficiency among cross cultural business are just a few long term benefits that you can carry with you should you choose to embrace a foreign language.

4. Be Flexible

The first three recommendations have to be in place before you can actually approach a new situation with flexibility. This step is key in order to quickly succeed in a cultural transition or exchange process. For example, you find yourself making a scheduled phone call to Sweden and the manufacturing manager of a particular part. Naturally you expect to speak to a Swedish individual focused on efficiency and timeliness. Nobody picks up at first and then a few minutes later you call again, this time someone picks up but the accent you hear is something completely different. It turns out the new manager was hired from Italy and had not been informed of your scheduled call. For your relationship to succeed it would be wise to use flexibility and engage in an open and candid conversation with the new manager, as opposed to informing him of his lack of timeliness in picking up the phone. If you approach cultural challenges with flexibility the probability of success is much higher.

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