

Why is the Russian guy stepping on my toes?

Facts and myths about cultural intelligence and why it's critical in Canada

So, you are living in a multi-cultural society, perhaps have friends from diverse cultures and you may even be game at times to try out different cultural cuisines. Does that make you culturally intelligent? Try your hand at this round of rapid-fire, true-false brain teasers:

- If you are in the Persian Gulf, being served sheep's head on your plate makes you an honoured guest.
- A grasshopper is a "pest" in Canada, a "pet" in China and an "appetizer" in northern Thailand.
- In Russia, whether at pleasure or work, if a person accidentally steps on another person's foot, it is common for the person who was stepped on to lightly step on the foot of the other in return to avoid future conflicts
- The Swiss have perfected the negative mental attitude so it works positively, by having the happy knack of seeing the downside of any situation.

If you answered true (no credit for guesswork) to all the statements above, give yourself a pat on the back. You are at least cognizant culture is like a labyrinth.

As a concept, cultural intelligence — which measures a person's capability to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity — has gained prominence only in the last six or seven years. That's new compared to the concepts of emotional intelligence (about 20 years old) and IQ (more than 100 years old).

Cultural intelligence or intercultural competence begins where emotional intelligence ends, although both



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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have the common element of the ability to suspend judgment. As your experience of cultural differences becomes more complex, your potential competence in intercultural interactions increases. This state is characterized by cognitive, affective (emotional) and physical aspects of intelligence working in harmony to enable you to easily move across cultural contexts.

Some professionals think: "I am brilliant in my job. Why do I need to be interculturally competent?"

To put things simply, with changing demographics and the new Canadian talent pool, there are diverse cultures converging at the workplace, engaging in a multitude of cultural interactions. Some of these interactions are positive while others result in conflict or a stress point.

In isolation, these stress points may not amount to much. But when they keep accumulating like "drops in a pond," they ultimately cause a ripple that can prove costly for any organization in terms of loss of productivity and morale, diversity-related incidents and even human rights complaints.

Hence, irrespective of whether

you're an international business traveler or a cubicle dweller, it becomes imperative to understand the impact of culture on management and how intercultural competence can give you a competitive advantage, not just in your career but for the organization as a whole.

Canada's changing demographics are going to make this even more urgent. By 2017, Canada's 150th birthday, roughly one out of every five Canadians will be a visible minority and about 70 per cent of them will be born outside Canada, according to Statistics Canada.

Can cultural intelligence be developed? Yes. It can be developed in psychologically healthy and professionally competent people, involving progression on a continuum where you can move from a stage of complete denial of cultural differences, transitioning through defense/reversal stages towards minimization, acceptance and the final stage of adaptation.

There's one final myth that needs dispelling: Some people think, with the world getting smaller and with powerful brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola omnipresent around the world, cultures are disappearing. It's a popular notion and it's easy to subscribe to. But it's simply not true.

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