**Intercultural Communication**

Understanding Ourselves

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One of the major obstacles to effective intercultural communication is not just that we find it difficult to understand others, but also because we don’t understand ourselves and our own cultural characteristics.

Attaining cultural competence and developing our intercultural communication skills requires us to change the relevant elements of our own approach to ensure synergy with the other party. This is necessary in order to overcome the cultural barriers. If we don’t know what our approach is, or the reasons we take this approach, then we can’t change it.

***We need to question why***

If we don’t know why we think the way that we do, why we have a particular attitude towards something, why we value some things and not others or why we behave or react in a particular way, then we don’t know what influences our perceptions towards others. If we don’t know what our assumptions about others are based on, then we can’t question or challenge these assumptions.



What’s right or wrong, good or bad, normal or abnormal is subjective and based on a comparison of what we observe against what our cultural conditioning tells us they should be. If we fail to understand that these are our perceptions only and not necessarily universal; and if we fail to understand that these perceptions are no better (or worse) than those of other cultures, then we fail to see the need to adapt. This is the first hurdle, and arguably the biggest, in attaining cross-cultural competence.

***We cannot understand and adapt to other cultures unless we have attained a degree of cultural self-awareness.***

Cultural awareness starts with cultural self-awareness. Only once we are culturally self-aware, can we can begin to predict the effect that our behaviour will have on others. Therefore understanding ourselves is the first step in attaining higher levels of cultural competence. This starts with a thorough understanding of our own culture and how this affects our own values, norms, attitudes and behaviours. We cannot understand and adapt to other cultures unless we have attained a degree of cultural self-awareness.

Cultural self-awareness also involves examining and questioning our own attitudes towards other cultures. Before trying to understand the attitudes of others, we should have a thorough understanding of our own and explore the assumptions that these attitudes are based on. By challenging these assumptions we can determine whether the attitudes we hold are those that will allow us to see situations objectively rather than having a distorted point of view. Unhelpful attitudes towards other cultures are a major intercultural communication barrier, and unless we are aware of these attitudes and are willing to change them, we will not overcome this barrier.



Sebastian Ioppolo has a wealth of experience in business having spent over twenty-six years in management and leadership roles in the corporate world. He is the author of *‘Intercultural Communication: Connecting with Cultural Diversity, as well as* two top selling books on International Business: *‘Import/Export: A Practical Guide for Australian Business’* and *‘Importing and Exporting: 24 Lessons to Get You Started’.* He now shares his knowledge and experience by conducting seminars, facilitating short courses and consulting throughout Australia via his business Mondiale Learning and Development.

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