DIVERSITY & CULTURAL AWARENESS - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

The way we interact with each other is influenced by various factors. Think of the various personalities of people you know, or the styles of leadership you exercised or experienced or even the different cultures you have come into contact with. When people from various cultural backgrounds converse, they experience differences in styles and patterns of communication which may result in tension or conflicts. Building awareness of differences across cultures is at the center of effective interpersonal communication.

MAIN IDEAS

Understanding the word 'culture'

One of the challenges we face when talking about culture is that there are various definitions and approaches to the concept. Anthropologists have used the term to describe the way people live and have offered a hundred different definitions. The root of the word 'culture' comes from the Latin cultus, which means 'to care for'. The derivatives of the word are diverse and help us understand it more:

- the term 'cult' refers to some worship or strong affiliation that shapes our behavior and thinking
- there is also the term 'cultivate', which means something that has been grown and developed, after being cared for over a period of time

The 19th century definitions of culture referred to it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" - Edward Tylor, 1869). The historical views of the term are a bit inadequate for our understanding of culture today as they falsely believed that:
- Culture is homogeneous
- Culture is a thing
- Culture is uniformly distributed among members of a group
- An individual possesses a single culture
- Culture is custom
- Culture is timeless

Modern approaches to the concept recognize that there are different definitions and types of cultures (Kevin Avruch, 1998).

"Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves." (T.Schwartz, 1992)

The virtues of these new approaches are many:
- Culture connects to experience
- Culture is located simultaneously outside individuals and inside them
- Culture is simultaneously inherited and learned

Recognizing the impact of culture and diversity

Growing our familiarity with cross-cultural differences improves our interactions with individuals who communicate in different ways than us and limits the frustration, misunderstandings and judgments associated to the process. The works of Geert Hofstede and the GLOBE Project provide useful tips around this topic.

We all have assumptions about people that we tend to regard as truth. In order to maximize the chances of positive and resonant communication, we need to explore these assumptions, put them in perspective and verify them. As we learn more about others' cultural specificities, we understand them better and become more open to adjust our style to fit their needs.

Culture impacts our communication styles and behavioural patterns in various ways. It shapes, among others:

● *The way we make decisions*: Some cultures tend to make decisions based on facts and figures whereas others are more intuitive or rely on judgment. The style that cultures follow in their decision-making also varies: some following a structured and detailed approach while others are more spontaneous and general.

● *Our orientation towards individualism or collectivism*: While some cultures focus on individual accomplishments, rights and decisions and see more collectivist cultures as less efficient and unclear, others place group affiliation and belonging at the core of their values and perceive individualistic customs as egotistic and arrogant.

● *The way we relate to authority and power*: The amount of control that authority figures possess varies across cultures as do cultural standards for how to show respect for their position.

● *The way we communicate*: The style and pace with which messages are communicated and perceived vary across cultures. While some cultures value direct and assertive communication, others tend to use a more implicit and allusive style. In some cultures, people prefer to interact and negotiate only with people they know. Getting directly to numbers or immediately talking about business would make the deal sink. On the other hand, getting into details about personal information, family or relationships is perceived as intrusive by other cultures. (For more details, refer to high-context and low-context cultures, Edward Hall). In some cultures, it is quite usual to talk over each other, while this is perceived as impolite within different groups. Similarly, our gestures, nonverbal expressions and use of silence also do not have the same significance within different cultural groups.

● *The way we show emotions*: Different cultures have different levels of comfort with expressing and dealing with emotions. While some appreciate emotional display as a sign of genuineness, others are less comfortable with getting emotional.

Seeing our cultural traits and styles in the eyes of others

When it comes to our cultures, others can easily see how our cultural traits and styles are expressed in our language and behaviors, but for us, these traits and manners are tacit, in other words, invisible to us like the glasses we forget perched on our noses.

For the next exercise, take some time to remember or familiarize yourself with the Johari Window (refer to the Practices and Exercises section).

As you reflect on the blind area in the Johari Window (what is known to others and unknown to self:
- ● What insights come to your mind as you're considering how others see your own culture?
- ● How can you learn to "see" your culture through other's eyes?
- ● How can you appreciate your culture while also holding it consciously and lightly enough that you can adapt?

Growing our capacity to relate, work together and communicate in a safe and respectful way across cultures takes practice. It also supposes an attitude of humility, patience, charity and discernment so that we recognise and rejoice in the richness of our own culture and remain open to the gifts of others.

For a deeper reflection on dealing with others from various cultures, refer to the section's Handout. In addition, a list of helpful attitudes and behaviors is offered in the Practices and Exercises section document "Effective strategies for culturally competent communication".

The Lewis Culture Model

This is a US study by Richard Lewis based on 50,000 executives that explores *how different cultures pay attention, relate, and lead*. The model highlights three main culture types:

- ● Linear-active cultures
- ● Multi-active cultures
- ● Reactive cultures

While the three categories are distinctive, each contains behavioural elements from the other two types (the question is which one is dominant). Take some time to go through the Handout for a brief on the various culture types as detailed in the Lewis Culture Model and react to it. You will also find helpful questions and reflections for integration.

The Cultural Intelligence (CI) Model

The CI model a research-based framework that can be used to help leaders manage intercultural settings and create understanding and awareness across various cultures. The model consists of four parts: knowledge, strategic thinking, motivation, and behaviors. It may be helpful to remember these as the ABCs of Cultural Intelligence:

- - Acquiring knowledge
  - - being attentive to cultural systems
  - - identifying cultural elements at play
  - - understanding how cultures are similar or different
- - Building strategic thinking
  - - thinking about the knowledge acquired
  - - interpreting it, strategizing and preparing to use it
- - Contemplating your motivation
  - - reflecting upon your drive, interests and willingness to work through, and with, cultural interactions
  - - being present, suspending judgment..
- - Do
  - - growing in adaptability
  - - performing new behaviors based on new cultural surroundings

Cultural awareness in the Ignatian tradition

Intercultural competence has been a feature of the Jesuit mission from the very beginning, though observed to varying degrees in a diverse range of contexts and circumstances. The first companions of Ignatius were from a range of city states and nations, several of them in conflict with one another at various times. Francis Xavier was from Navarre. Faber was from Savoy. Lainez and Bobadilla were from Castile. Alfonso Salmeron was from Toledo. And Simon Rodrigues was from Portugal.

In the Constitutions, Ignatius insisted that attention be paid to the circumstances of country, place, language, different mentalities, and personal temperaments (Cfr. Constitutions, 301, 508, 581, 747, 395, 458, 462, 671, 64, 66, 71, 136, 211, 238, 449, etc.).

IGNATIAN NOTE

If we imagine ourselves with the Trinity, in the spirit of Ignatius, looking down on the earth as the third millennium of Christianity is about to unfold, what do we see? More than five billion human beings—some male, some female; some rich, many more poor; some yellow, some brown, some black, some white; some at peace, some at war; some Christian (1.95 billion), some Muslim (1 billion), some Hindu (777 million), some Buddhist (341 million), some of new religious movements (128 million), some of indigenous religions (99 million), some Jewish (14 million), some of no religion at all (1.1 billion).

What meaning and what opportunity does this rich ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism that characterizes God's world today have for our lives and for our mission of evangelization? And how do we respond to the racism, cultural prejudice, religious fundamentalism, and intolerance that mark so much of today's world?

Decree 5: "Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," General Congregation 34 (1995)

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Understanding the implications of diversity and culture for communications
2. Realizing the extent to which our cultural background influences our communication styles
3. Exploring how different cultures pay attention, relate, and lead using the Lewis Culture model
4. Assessing one's own cultural awareness

"They should make themselves approachable by humility and love, becoming all things for the sake of all; let them clearly adopt, as far as the Institute of the Society allows, the customs of those peoples."

Saint Ignatius of Loyola