



Intercultural Competence: An Essential Skill Desperately Needed Now!

By Sarah Bergdahl

Could you easily define your own culture? Have you had confusing intercultural experiences? In a relationship, is it best to focus on ways “they” are like “us?”

Intercultural competence is a process of self discovery, curiosity, learning and gradual transformation in the way that one exists in the world. It is understanding “states of mind” and contexts for making decisions. It’s been said that “culture is to people as water is to fish,” thus suggesting the difficulty in separating oneself from one’s culture sufficiently to gain perspective on what it is and what it isn’t. Without use of this lens, it is impossible to appreciate what drives our own values, beliefs and patterns of behavior let alone those of another culture.

“Within a group, culture is what everybody knows, that everybody else knows.” It can satisfy the human need to belong, regulate boundaries, and serve as a foundation for identity development. These systems of meaning are handed down through everyday interactions. Individuals live out the systems through their own particular combination of circumstances, personalities and perspectives. We are all influenced by the culture we’re raised in even though we may put our own unique twist on select patterns!

It is important to look at cultural patterns as well as to remember that every culture has “cultural deviants” or those that are on the fringe of the mainstream. Our fear of being accused of stereotyping causes us to shy away from generalities about groups of people. Subsequently, we prefer thinking of everyone as an individual, freely making their own choices. When we do this, we are triggering a powerful North American (as well as Canadian, and some of N. European) cultural norm of valuing *individuality*. In

contrast, a person from a more *collectivist* culture (Japan, Mexico, Libya) might assume everyone acts from a sense of duty or familial obligation as opposed to free choice.

Even if one never sets foot out of the United States, it is inevitable that people from diverse cultures and ethnicities will be neighbors, professional colleagues, students, employers, and employees. Without increased cultural and intercultural awareness

and competence, we are left to function ethnocentrically. That means we are stuck believing that our way is logical, right, superior, and in time, the way anyone in their right mind would choose to do things.

The goal of intercultural competence is not advanced understanding of international policies and

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practices. It is mindful participation in the daily interactions of our neighborhoods, schools and workplaces in ways that acknowledge differences, and support each person in feeling as though they matter and are respected. As mediators, we are accustomed to listening for different perspectives and searching for common ground. To build a bridge between those of different cultures we must work to understand that our own unquestioned reality and perceptions of “normal,” often blind and deafen us to other ways of knowing and being. Awareness and respect are necessary steps on the path to intercultural competency. The development of intercultural competency is the foundation for effective relationships in our families, our communities, and the world. It doesn’t happen by accident. Let’s get to work!

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