

## CULTURAL AWARENESS



Culture is the way we work together. Improving culture can be a concerted effort, or it can mean taking a different perspective on current change efforts. Collectively changing how we work together usually involves a few steps: awareness and engagement, assessment of current culture, discussions about what changes can be made, and making small changes over time. This guide contains tools that can be used as the focal point for a shift in culture.



## What is culture?

Culture is the way we think, our values, our attitudes, our perceptions and our beliefs. It's also about how we act, our habits and our typical behaviours. It's not about one person. Culture is about the beliefs we share, what we expect of each other, what's considered normal and the way we behave that determines how our organization functions. It's "the way we do things around here."

"Culture" refers to a group or community which shares common experiences that shape the way its members understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as race, national origin, gender, class, or religion. It can also include a group we join or become part of. For example, it is possible to acquire a new culture by moving to a new country or region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

## WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT?

Culture is a strong part of people's lives. It influences their views, their values, their humor, their hopes, their loyalties, and their worries and fears. So when you are working with people and building relationships with them, it helps to have some perspective and understanding of their cultures.

It is important to remember that everyone has an important viewpoint and role to play when it comes to culture. You don't have to be an expert to build relationships with people different from yourself; you don't have to have a degree to learn to become sensitive to cultural issues; and you don't have to be a social worker to know how culture has affected your life.

## Cultural differences

Cultural differences are the various beliefs, behaviors, languages, practices and expressions considered unique to members of a specific ethnicity, race or national origin. Some examples of cultural differences as they pertain to the workplace include employees who are younger or older than their co-workers, employees who hold higher degrees than others in the workplace and individuals who grew up in either metropolitan areas or small towns. It is said that employees often have more similarities than they do differences, but those differences can sometimes outweigh the similarities. While these various differences can create a more vibrant office, they can also lead to more than a few problems resulting from culture clash.



## DIVERSITY

### Examples of Cultural Differences

- Body Language
- Personal Space
- Eye Contact
- Facial Expressions
- Speech
- Being Direct in Conversation

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY ISSUES AT THE WORKPLACE

- Employers should train employees new to this country what standards of behaviour are expected of them.
- The corollary to the above is that Employers should also train existing employees to be sensitive to employees from cultures different than their own.
- The failure to properly train employees could have serious legal implications ( harassment, hostile environment claims ) for employers and result in employees becoming de-motivated.

## Discrimination

Discrimination is the act of giving an employee or potential employee an unfair advantage or disadvantage in the workplace based on his or her gender, age, creed or religion, political affiliation, handicap, marital status, or ethnicity. In some states, it is also considered discrimination when these advantages or disadvantages are based on sexuality or arrest or conviction record. Discrimination laws cover recruiting and hiring, training, promotion, and pay of employees. When a company is found in violation of discrimination laws, it not only must rectify the situation and pay compensation to the disadvantages, but will usually also incur high court costs and fines.

## Hostile Environment Harassment

Hostile environment harassment occurs when an employee faces discrimination or harassment that is so severe and widespread that it prevents him or her from properly performing the job. This type of harassment may be threatening, offensive, intimidating, or humiliating, and it is possible for an employee to be subject to harassment and discrimination from multiple parties. This type of work environment is not only detrimental to productivity, but it can also have a profoundly negative impact on the mental, emotional, and physical health of employees. Employers who engage in or encourage hostile environment harassment are oftentimes subject to legal action from employees since such behavior almost always violates state and federal employment laws. Preventing hostile environment harassment is an important part of human resource management.



## Color discrimination

Color discrimination takes place whenever an employee experiences discrimination rooted in the shade of his or her skin color. One thing to bear in mind with this type of discrimination is that it's not the same as racial discrimination, as people of the same race can have different skin tones. What's more is color discrimination can also occur whenever a person is discriminated against either for associating with or being married to someone of a specific skin complexion or color. In addition to discrimination, an employee can face harassment due to her or his skin color in the form of racial slurs, being subjected to racially-offensive symbols or being subjected to derogatory remarks made about her or his skin color.

## How important is cultural awareness in business?

Cultural awareness becomes central when companies and business people have to interact with people from other countries and other cultures in order to make international business. Cultural awareness is important because **people see, interpret and evaluate things in a different ways**.

## How to develop cultural competence?

### How to Develop—and Apply—Your Cultural Competence

- Know your cultural identities and beliefs.
- Get to know the community where you work. Join social activities and attend local events as well as...
- Get to know your clients.
- Set the stage for information exchange.

## What is cultural awareness, sensitive, and knowledge?

Cross cultural sensitivity is the **knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of other cultures**. On the individual level, it allows clients and workers to successfully navigate a different culture that they are interacting with whereas it is considered one of the primary factors that drive the way organizations behave.

## What does culturally sensitive mean?

Being culturally sensitive **enables a person to approach interactions with people from different cultures in a respectful manner**, both in workplace and interpersonal interactions. Cultural sensitivity is important for organizational leaders to understand as well.

## How to improve cultural sensitivity?

- Use both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Cultivate patience and listen attentively.



- Show interest in learning about other cultures.
- Avoid stereotypes.
- Check what you think you heard.

## Why is Cultural Awareness Important?



### Why focus on culture?

When working across different cultures it is important to understand the rules and cultural expectations of others.

**If you don't, you can make mistakes. These mistakes can be harmless, or, they can also be very serious.**

Working with people from different cultures has become more and more frequent for many of us and, as a result, more important as we have clients from worldwide.

### Culture

The reason we focus on 'culture' in training is because of the very fact that many people within professional and personal life underestimate the impact cultural differences can have.

Although it may be easy to learn facts and do's and don'ts about different cultures, this is not necessarily being culturally aware.

If you think of culture as an iceberg, what we see of a culture is tiny in comparison to what we cannot see. **It is the unseen elements of culture such as values and beliefs, that are usually hardest for people to understand and deal with.** When we interact in cross cultural situations, a lack of awareness can lead to bad or poor decisions.

Cultural awareness helps us reduce the chances of making bad decisions and increases the chance of us making more insightful, considered decisions.



## Word from FIDI ...

### Cross-cultural awareness: more than just a different country

If there's a single piece of advice for prospective expats, it's this: **get ready for the unexpected.**

Although assignees will spend hours planning their relocation ( you never really know what's going to happen while you're there. Which is why you need to be ready for anything.

One thing you can be sure of? **No two-week holiday – however authentic – can prepare you for working in another country.** That would be like saying babysitting a few times prepares you for parenthood. The cultural differences you will face exist on 3 levels.

#### 1. The impact of your surroundings

First and foremost, you will be in a different part of the world. This new geography will have a number of real-world effects on your life as an expat:

- **Climate** – it may well be hotter, colder, windier or rainier than you're used to. Or even all of them at once – looking at you San Francisco. You can easily find the annual averages online. Dress accordingly and be prepared – expats going to Moscow, in particular!
- **Travel** – being in a different part of the world brings all kinds of **new and exciting travel opportunities**. If you're moving to Europe for the first time, we advise you to visit more than your host country while you're there. Conversely, if you are going to Australia, be aware that going anywhere else for a while could be arduous and expensive.
- **Nature** – don't be too pre-occupied by your work that you miss the wonderful world around you. Whether it's the beautiful landscapes and sunsets, or unusual animals, birds, and insects: revel in the strange splendor of your new habitat.

#### 2. Relevant cultural components for expats

More than the location itself, you will find you are different to the people surrounding you. They have spent thousands of years building their way of life, so it's not suddenly going to change once you arrive. Welcome to avoiding culture shock 101.

- **Bureaucracy & laws** – there is always red tape involved with living and working in a new country, and there will be strange new laws to learn (Singapore is a fascinating example). For many expats, the legal and administrative side is something the Global Mobility departments handles. If not, a FAIM-certified relocation company will know and understand local rules, and will be more than willing to do more than





just ship boxes. If you're in trouble, you can count on your nation's embassy or consulate for certain types of support.

- **Money & tax** – you may well need to get used to a different currency, but bear in mind the often-complex issues involving tax and personal finances.
- **Religion** – the belief systems in place shape the culture and way of life. From the expat perspective, this often simply adds some *couleur locale* – but be aware that it can also cause **very different attitudes**. What is culturally normal in one country may be perceived as gender bias, racism or homophobia in others.
- **Holidays & customs** – often driven by national history, these vary all over the world, and **can cause chaos on the roads** and in the airports as everyone goes home simultaneously. If you don't want to get caught out by an unexpected day of celebration to commemorate the former president's birthday, check out a few important dates here.
- **Food** – from the **mouth-watering** to the frankly intimidating. Pickled herrings and pigs' ears, fried locusts and crispy tarantulas. It's all out there waiting to be tasted. Enjoy.
- **Language** – although you may well find English spoken widely, it's polite to learn a little of the local language – not to mention enriching. Ensuring smooth cross-cultural communication is also an excellent way to avoid culture shock.
- **Family life** – **accommodation, schooling, commuting** and many other mundane family activities will all be a new and strange experience. Get the family ready for life abroad with a few tips.

### 3. A changed (self-)perception

This one that takes many expats by surprise – but it could be the most important of all. The wide-eyed idealist that sets out is not the same as the **worldly-wise traveler who returns**: you (and your family) will all have been shaped by the experience.

The plus side? Your career prospects may have been enhanced. If your assignment was a successful one, your services may well be in demand again. But the downside is that **your expectations may also have changed**, and are no longer aligned with your employers, leading to an unhappy repatriation when you get back to your former workplace.

In the same way that many expats find it hard to fit back into their previous professional role, it may also be **hard to re-integrate socially** into a world where you have become a stranger.

### Are you fully prepared?

If you can't definitively say 'yes', FIDI can advise you to follow a thorough cross-cultural awareness training session by a dedicated expert.

