



What leads to cultural intelligence?

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Abstract The ability to interact effectively in multiple cultures is not a skill possessed by all; yet, it is becoming more important in today's global business world. Recently, this skill has been labeled cultural intelligence (CQ), and has caught the attention of business leaders and researchers alike. While previous studies have examined potential outcomes of cultural intelligence, possible antecedents are examined herein. This investigation generates some insight regarding the impact of cultural exposure on CQ, as well as developing an understanding of how the depth of cultural exposure influences a person's cultural intelligence. Findings indicate that certain types of exposures to other cultures (such as education abroad and employment abroad) and the level of exposure from these experiences increases cultural intelligence. These findings are critical for multinational firms as managers hire, promote, train, and prepare employees for international assignments. Additionally, some have discussed how cultural intelligence is a critical skill for global business leaders, and it seems likely that CQ will become increasingly important due to the rise of diversity in the workforce.

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1. What is cultural intelligence?

It is often easy to see when someone makes a cultural blunder. For instance, during a business meeting at the Paris location of a United States multinational company, a visiting Turkish employee used an aggressive tone in his attempt to discuss the financial status of the company with U.S. and French executives. The company had been performing poorly over the past few months and the employee not only highlighted the problem, but also criticized the executives who were his superiors. What he failed to recognize during this interaction was that he not only insulted the executives by his tone and aggressiveness, but also

embarrassed himself and them. He believed that he was making a positive impression on those at the meeting via his knowledge of the company; yet, his difficulty adjusting to the cultural setting and inability to interpret the cultural cues present actually created a negative impression. The situation became uncomfortable for the other people at the meeting. What could have been a productive dialog about the financial status of the company developed into an argumentative session, which ended abruptly without resolution.

In another instance, during a meeting with people from all over the world at a German institution, an individual from the United States was eating an apple and drinking a large bottle of water while loudly discussing why she believed it was unfair that

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she could not rollerblade in the bike lane in Germany. She could not seem to understand why the Germans were so offended by her actions, and during the meeting she did not recognize how her current behaviors of eating, drinking, and conversing loudly were making those from other countries uncomfortable. Throughout the interaction, she failed to interpret the cultural cues others from around the world were displaying; later, she stated how surprised she was at her difficulty adjusting to life in Germany.

In both of these cases, the subjects were unaware of the cultural cues being conveyed to them. Each had problems adjusting to their new cultural setting; however, other individuals were able to make the adjustment. How is it that some individuals are more successful than others in a cross-cultural business situation? How can some people travel easily from country to country and effectively conduct business, while others may only be effective in a few countries or completely ineffective outside their home country?

The ability to interact effectively in multiple cultures has recently been labeled *cultural intelligence* (CQ). It is defined as a "multifaceted competency consisting of cultural *knowledge*, the practice of *mindfulness*, and the repertoire of *behavioral skills*" (Thomas & Inkson, 2004, pp. 182-183, italics in the original). CQ is a capability that allows individuals to understand and act appropriately across a wide range of cultures (Thomas, 2006). It is thought to be a "culture-free construct that applies across specific cultural circumstances" (Ng & Earley, 2006, p. 10). It is a person's capability to adjust to diverse cultural situations (Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh, 2006; Earley & Ang, 2003) and effectively adapt to various cultural settings (Ng & Earley, 2006). It improves understanding in cross-cultural interactions (Earley, 2002; Sharma & Mulka, 1993). Peterson (2004) stated that CQ "is the ability to engage in a set of behaviors that uses skills (i.e., language or interpersonal skills) and qualities (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility) that are tuned appropriately to the culture-based values and attitudes of the people with whom one interacts" (p. 89). In order to be culturally intelligent, an individual needs to know how to suspend judgment of a situation until multiple cues can be assessed, as well as integrate and understand the knowledge gained from the situation (Triandis, 2006). It is thought that individuals with a high level of CQ have "a strong mastery and sense of emotional display and physical presence" (Earley, Ang, & Tan, 2006, p. 34). Researchers of cultural intelligence are seeking to understand why some individuals are more effective than others in adapting to new cultural settings

(Ng & Earley, 2006). Determining what contributes to this ability, which is grounded in multiple intelligence theory (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Ang, Van Dyne, Yee, & Koh, 2004; Earley & Ang, 2003), is a crucial question.

CQ is composed of four parts: meta-cognition, cognition, motivation, and behavior. High CQ individuals use all four in unison (Ang et al., 2004; Ang et al., 2006; Earley & Peterson, 2004; Ng & Earley, 2006). *Meta-cognition* is defined as an individual's knowledge or control over cognitions that leads to deep information processing (Ang et al., 2004). It is concentrated in the ability to process information and the knowledge of processing it (Earley & Ang, 2003), as well as the individual's motives, goals, emotions, and external stimuli (Thomas, 2006). It is not sufficient to simply know oneself to obtain high CQ; individuals must be able to be flexible in their self-concept, and have the ability to integrate new components into their self-concept (Earley & Ang, 2003).

Cognition refers to using knowledge of self, the social environment, and information processing (Earley & Ang, 2003); with regard to CQ, it involves the general knowledge about the structures of a culture (Ang et al., 2006; Ng & Earley, 2006). It is information gained from experience and education that involves specific norms, practices, and conventions, including universal facets of culture as well as culture-specific differences (Ang et al., 2004).

The *motivation* aspect of CQ involves a person's interest in learning and functioning in cross-cultural situations (Ang et al., 2004; Ang et al., 2006). This facet of CQ includes three primary motivators: enhancement, or wanting to feel good about oneself; growth, or wanting to challenge and improve oneself; and continuity, or the desire for continuity and predictability in one's life (Earley et al., 2006). This component directs and motivates an individual's adaptation to a new cultural setting, and it can be broken down into enhancement, efficacy, and consistency (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng & Earley, 2006).

The final facet of CQ is *behavior*, or the action aspect of the construct (Earley et al., 2006). It includes a person's ability to exhibit the appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors when interacting with others from a different cultural background (Ang et al., 2004; Ang et al., 2006; Ng & Earley, 2006), and to generally interact competently with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Thomas, 2006). This may also include the inhibition of displaying certain behaviors (Earley & Ang, 2003), and the recognition that not interacting may be appropriate (Thomas, 2006).

Currently, no information exists regarding what leads to higher levels of CQ. Each of these aspects of

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