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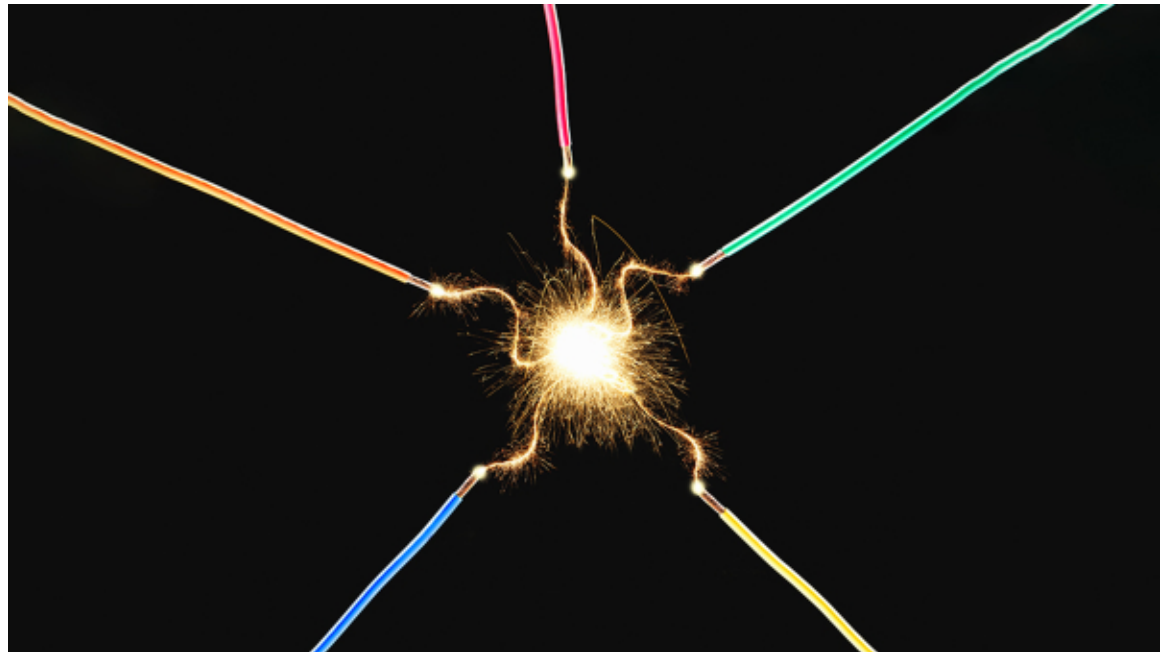
by Jane Hyun and Douglas Conant

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3 Ways to Improve Your Cultural Fluency

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On Doug's first trip to visit Campbell's Mexican production facilities during his tenure as the new CEO, he held a large group meeting with employees. In his earnest but brash way, he pressed them to engage in candid dialogue with him. It didn't go well. The employees were visibly uncomfortable and it was clear that they felt the forum was disrespectful. Doug later learned that the employees thought it was inappropriate to speak so openly to leadership in a group setting. He apologized to the local management and acknowledged his lack of understanding. It was an early — and humbling — lesson in the importance of cultural fluency.

Cultural fluency in leadership is critical for building trust, and is a competency that has been repeatedly [linked to financial performance](#). Building long term [cross-cultural relationships](#) leads to increased [creativity](#) and out-of-the box thinking. It is an essential ingredient for driving productivity and innovation while also staving off the kind of uniformity that can lead to “groupthink” (which can limit a company’s ability to reach a global customer base).

So why don’t more corporate leaders possess this skill? Often, they want to, but they don’t know how to translate their good intentions into leadership practices. It is very difficult for managers to diagnose their own blind spots, and even trickier to fix the ones they see. Instead of seeking to more deeply understand how other cultural groups view certain interactions, managers often view business interactions and communications through the lens of their *own* cultural framework. Other times, cultural differences are overlooked in pursuit of efficiency, to avoid mistakes, or out of fear of being politically incorrect. This myopia can create a disconnect that leaves both the manager and the employee feeling frustrated and unable to get the best work done.

For leaders to engage their workforce to deliver maximum value, they must learn how to fully utilize the talent of *all* employees, not just those who are similar to themselves. Here’s how to build your cultural fluency:

Reflect: Assess your own competence level and get expert guidance.

It is difficult to self-diagnose your own skillsets because of your blind spots. In other words, you can’t manage something you can’t measure. Obtaining external expertise to benchmark both your personal and organizational cultural competence can help. Based on our experience facilitating multi-year projects in global organizations, the most accurate, reliable, and objective measurement tool is the [Intercultural Development Inventory \(IDI\)](#) — a rigorously validated, research-backed measure that individuals can use to assess their cultural competence in leadership. Because it is based on a developmental model, not only does it assess your cultural competence, it also provides a roadmap for future learning by identifying the mindsets (and behaviors) required to adapt your leadership.

Once you understand your areas of improvement, consider working with someone outside of your organization who can objectively guide you on where to focus first. It may be adjusting a strategy for onboarding new clients from different cultural backgrounds. It may be learning how to better motivate multicultural teams. Or it may be checking your assumptions about why people act the way they do — personalities are often shaped by culture, and it’s important to understand the context of an employee’s behavior.

For example, Doug worked with his coauthor Jane, a global leadership strategist, to learn how his behaviors reflected the culture in which he was brought up. He learned that his perspective was heavily influenced by being male and by his American-based value system. Doug had been interpreting situations based on *his version* of “treating people with respect” without a deeper understanding of how those behaviors landed with his audience.

Act with intent: Be curious and open to learning a new way of managing.

To individuals who have grown up in cultures different than your own, your management style could be ineffective, and even considered inappropriate. As a leader, you must be willing to adjust your approach to others. Never assume that others will adapt to you.

If you are headquartered in one country and are assigned to lead a project with a cross-cultural team in a different market, think about how you will approach workers when you meet them for the first time and be ready to question your “default managing mode.” Ask yourself: How will I obtain each team member’s input as the project gets started? What’s the most effective way to debrief after our first meeting? This can apply to employees in your own office or employees abroad.

Consider what adjustments you can make to help each team member feel comfortable contributing. An “open door policy” is a good way to encourage communication, but it may not be enough when you are first getting to know your team — not everyone will want to walk through your door. Listening more than talking is another strategy. Wait for others to speak up before stating your own ideas in a meeting, and allow silence on a conference call after asking a question. This will help you observe how your various team members prefer to communicate.

Lastly, if you encounter something that you don’t understand, it is better to ask rather than to assume. You may find that this takes more time in the first few meetings, but it will pay off in the long run. Building a foundation of trust is essential and will help your team overcome conflict should it later arise.

Doug’s experience offers a case in point. Over time, he discovered that people from different cultures (in and outside of the U.S.) interpreted his zealous approach as disrespectful. This discovery led to an ongoing exploration of how to shift his behaviors when engaging with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. After a few years, his cultural fluency in leadership visibly improved, as evidenced by greater engagement scores from his global teams. But even today, it is a continuous process that requires constant reflection and learning.

Practice: Remain non-judgmental when conflict surfaces.

When conflicts driven by cultural differences arise between you and a team member, it’s best to clear the air by talking face-to-face. Schedule a one-on-one meeting with that individual and ask yourself these questions beforehand — they will help suspend any cultural beliefs or biases that may affect your approach:

- 1) *What might this person be thinking?* Consider their feelings and concerns. Try to understand where your employee is coming from, and how cultural context may play a part. You’ll be more equipped to work towards a solution.

2) *How can I best connect with them?* Think about how to create an environment in which your colleague feels comfortable speaking about the situation. It may be helpful to consult a knowledgeable intermediary or coach beforehand to discuss the best approach.

During the meeting itself, focus on listening deeply to your team member — use non-judgmental observation instead of criticizing. Make it clear that you want to work with them to find a resolution, and in the end, make your team stronger. If you’ve noticed this team member refrains from speaking up about their opinions in your presence, for example, you can say: “Your insights during our one-on-ones are excellent. The next time we have a meeting be prepared to share something with the group, so I can give you an opportunity to show what your hard work has accomplished.”

You should also be open to adjusting your own management style. Asking your team member for feedback can help. Are there any actions you can take or changes you can make to obtain their full engagement? The goal is to give feedback and also get feedback about the best way to engage the other party.

Remember, like any other leadership competency, cultural fluency is a muscle that can be strengthened, but not built overnight. If you want to win the hearts and minds of your employees in a multicultural setting, the secret is to stay humble, remain curious about learning diverse perspectives, and be willing to adapt your communication approach. Only then will you tap into the power cultural differences can bring to your organization.

Jane Hyun is a global leadership strategist and Founder & President of [Hyun & Associates](#). She has worked with thousands of leaders in Fortune 500 companies to build high performing diverse teams. She is the coauthor of [Flex/The New Playbook for Managing Across Differences](#) and author of [Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling](#). She’s on Twitter [@JaneHyun](#) and LinkedIn.

Douglas Conant is the founder and CEO of [ConantLeadership](#) and the former CEO and president of, Campbell Soup Company.
