When Culture Counts

When does culture count? If you’re on an international assignment or working virtually with people from other cultures, differences in cultural assumptions and values can impact your work in many ways.

Challenges
You’ll see some of the impacts, for example, in different approaches to establishing productive relationships, working in teams, obtaining information, handling disagreement, motivating direct reports, building agreements, and making decisions.

Culture Clash
Even when we assume we are speaking the same language, it quickly becomes apparent that different cultures have very different views of what is — and is not — appropriate.

*Person from Culture A:* “One thing that’s really frustrating is when I’m in a meeting with my colleagues from other countries and we’re trying to sort out on an issue, and they don’t speak up… We’re on the same team, and I expect them to participate, but it’s like pulling teeth — are they not *willing* to contribute? — or maybe they don’t *have* anything to contribute! Anyway, it drives me crazy.”

*Person from Culture B:* “In my country you speak up if you have something important to add; if not, you don’t waste people’s time. I know many people in this country who speak up in a meeting just to let others know that they are there, even if they don’t really have anything of value to say. If I did this kind of meaningless chatter in my country, people would think I was either stupid or arrogant….”

Working with foreign colleagues can quickly become unproductive when there is little awareness or understanding of differing assumptions and expectations.

Visible and Hidden Culture
Culture is often likened to an iceberg, in that what we can perceive is only the tip. The tip of the culture iceberg is made up of things we can observe — what people wear, do, and say.

However, the majority of the iceberg lies below the surface and is not easily visible. It’s made up of the values, assumptions, and beliefs that shape and drive behavior — the “unwritten rules” that dictate what is considered “appropriate” or “inappropriate” in that culture. These fundamental values and beliefs — for example, a culture’s attitude toward hierarchy and status, or its orientation toward time — are buried deep within each culture’s “iceberg” and are often unspoken, even unconscious.
Impact of Culture
These invisible values, assumptions, and beliefs shape and drive everything, including our work patterns, how we socialize outside of work, our views of gender-appropriate behavior, our concepts of right and wrong, ways of handling problems or disagreements, interaction between managers and subordinates, and communication and meeting styles.

The Lens of Culture
Miscommunication and misunderstandings occur when we observe the behavior of people from other cultures and misinterpret them based on our own set of assumptions and values, and vice versa.

Perceptions vs. Intentions
For example, the person from Culture A believes that thinking out loud stimulates creativity, and that if people aren't talking, nothing is happening.

In contrast, the person from Culture B values voicing considered opinions, and believes that speaking without thinking carefully first wastes other people's time. Silence in Culture B is valued, as it reflects thought.

When these two people interact, the person from Culture A may feel that the person from Culture B is unfriendly and uncommunicative, while the person from Culture B may see the person from Culture A as superficial and arrogant.

Accurate Interpretation
Learning to interpret our own and others' behavior from the other culture's perspective is therefore a critical skill in communicating effectively with global colleagues. We will not only avoid misinterpreting their behavior and forming negative judgments — we can also understand how to present ourselves more effectively and build credibility with them.

Dimensions of Culture
How do we learn about the “deep iceberg” of other cultures?
There are a number of “dimensions” — or ways of looking at behavior — that prove useful in understanding different cultures. Research has shown that generalizations can be made about where people from different cultures will typically fall on each of the dimensions you see here.

You’ll be able to see where you lie on these dimensions, as well as where your foreign colleagues and counterparts are, when you use the GlobeSmart Profile™ web tool.
Summary
In summary, the first step towards productive engagement with people from other cultures is awareness that we may, in fact, have different styles, and that we may not view the world — and how we should communicate or behave in it — in the same way. This awareness is learned — we are not born with it. Examining our own assumptions and values, and being aware that we may be making judgments that make sense in our own culture, but may not be appropriate from the perspective of others, is a useful place to begin.

Second, ask, observe and listen: Demonstrate an interest in learning. Consider alternative interpretations. Check your assumptions about the intentions behind other people’s words or actions. Avoid making quick judgments.

Third, discuss and share observations: check your conclusions, either with the other person, or with a third party who is familiar with both cultures. Be willing to carefully explain your intentions when it seems that others are misunderstanding them.

Finally, adapt and modify: identify ways that you can adapt your behavior or communication style to make your interactions more productive. And suggest ways that your counterparts might do the same.