The Effects of Culture on Productivity
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How does culture affect our levels of productivity? In today's global environment people are increasingly working together across cultures, often without truly understanding the underlying differences that may be unintentionally sabotaging them. In too many cases, people assume that if they work for the same organization or speak the same language then they will have the same objectives and goals. However, while the end goals may be the same, the path to reach them often takes many hazardous twists and turns. In some cases this may result in increased levels of frustration and stress, lack of motivation and productivity and misunderstandings that ultimately affect the bottom line. In worst case scenarios, it can also sever a professional relationship or partnership where one of the parties is left feeling perplexed as to what happened.

There are however antidotes to this problem. While it is clear that most people will not change their core values and behavioral patterns overnight, building cultural awareness skills will decrease some of the issues that can damage business relationships and allow for a smoother transition when working across cultures. The following tips are effective not only in increasing productivity levels but also in enhancing communication skills in cross-cultural settings.

1) **Always ask for clarification in both verbal and non-verbal language.** What you may consider a forthright and honest way of bringing up an issue might cause your colleague to lose face because of your direct approach, thereby creating distrust and a strain in future interactions. Be aware of how you are presenting the subject and watch for body language, which represents 55% of all communication. Also, don't assume you understand gestures. What may be acceptable in one culture can often be an insult in another. Use verbal expressions to explain any non-verbal gestures you use.

2) **Don't take others' mistakes personally.** Even if you are working together on a multicultural project and one of your team members makes what you perceive to be an egregious mistake, remember that each individual will bring his or her own work style and perspective to the team. Use this as an opportunity to get to know your foreign colleagues better by asking them for an explanation and trying to understand their reasoning.

3) **Accept that you don't understand what you don't know.** We all want to believe that we are competent in all areas and highly skilled at our jobs. However, no matter how culturally savvy we may be, there are always nuances that will trip us. If someone is behaving in a way that seems inappropriate, take the time to ask him or her to explain the action instead of making assumptions based on your own cultural filters.

4) **Increase awareness of your own preconceptions**. We all carry cultural baggage that prescribes our behavior, certain values and how we perceive the world and others. It also allows us to categorize situations and people. The more we become aware of our biases, the easier it will be to accept and understand others' differences. This will ultimately help break stereotypes and false generalizations about people and their culture.

5) **Reinterpret behaviors from others' cultural perspectives.** Try to put situations in context. Ask for clarification on what motivates them.

6) **Be willing to test, adapt and change as needed.** A key component to creating cross-cultural competency is the ability to observe how our own actions and behaviors impact the environment. While it can be dangerous to throw ourselves into a situation and "do as the Romans when in Rome" because we are still blinded by our own cultural filters, through astute observation we can determine certain rules of how we should or should not be behaving.

7) **Don't judge others by your own cultural values.** Remember that they belong to you and may not be shared by all cultures. There is no right or wrong—only different. Learn to respect those differences.

8) **Keep communication simple**. Try to minimize and customize correspondence as much as possible and always confirm that there is an understanding. Avoid using words that have more than one meaning. Steer away from slang and industry specific jargon that could get lost in the translation.

9) **Recognize and accept that lifestyle priorities differ across cultures.** You may be a workaholic who adheres strictly to deadlines, sometimes to the point of sacrificing your personal life, however your colleague overseas may give preference to his 50-member family above all else. While you may each be motivated by different things, it is important to respect the boundaries of the other and to modify your expectations accordingly. Ultimately this will ensure a more harmonious relationship.

10) **ADAPT** to your new environment by examining your surroundings. **ADJUST** your thinking and behavior to the circumstances or situation in order to be successful and **ACCOMMODATE** your style to meet others' expectations.

Applying these principles may help divert a crisis situation that will anger your boss back at the home office. At the same time, it will also provide you with more insight into who you are and what makes you tick. Keep in mind that gaining cross-cultural knowledge will in most cases facilitate building stronger and longer-lasting relationships, help you redefine who you are and understand what motivates you, increase your capacity for communicating—and allow you to sleep more peacefully at night.