



Growing Cultural Competency

Are you culturally competent? Does your firm have the collective competency to meet the requirements of diverse employees and clients of today and tomorrow?

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Culture – *n.* the training and development of the mind; the refinement of taste and manners acquired by such training; the social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestations etc. that characterize a society

Cultured – *past part.* to make a culture of; to grow in a prepared medium

Cultural – *adj.* of or relating to culture or a culture; produced by breeding

Competent – *adj.* having the necessary qualities or skills; showing adequate skill;

Larousse Universal Illustrated Dictionary

The traditional view of cultural competence would be to learn how to behave ‘when in Rome’ or ‘when trying to work with *them*’ – to learn the rituals or traditions of a certain cultural/ethnic group in order to do business or interact without offending.

How to shake hands, present your business card; the purpose of small talk; the appropriateness of eye contact or socializing with clients. Useful bits of

knowledge to be sure in today’s global world but in many ways, limiting our ability to become ‘competent’ because the reliance on checklists of behaviours for this group or that doesn’t recognize two key factors:

- 1) not everyone in any group will exhibit or embrace every characteristic; and
- 2) things change very quickly, thus giving such lists a past-due date.

A fatal flaw in this interpretation of cultural competence is the reality that most of us don't interact with groups but rather with individuals who may or may not embrace some or all of the cultural stereotypes, rituals and characteristics.

Perhaps then, it is time to acknowledge a broader, more inclusive concept of *diversity cultural competence*. This concept speaks to building skills in recognizing, accepting and valuing the cultures (in the fullest sense) of those on the outside as well as the culture of the inside – individually, and collectively of the firm – and whether or not that culture is serving you well.

A firm's culture provides formal and informal direction to all that enter. It provides context for how we do things here; what gets recognized and valued; how we talk, communicate; what is important.

Regardless of what is said in policy, it is often the culture, formed by a history of stories and actions across the life of the organization, that determines an organization's unwritten 'book of shoulds.' That is, to thrive (not just survive) here, you/we should work this way, talk like that, attend these functions, look like this, value these things, and the list goes on.

It may be that these 'shoulds' have survived for years for good reason; it may also be just as likely that they exist because of past preferences and have had little examination for what is best for the firm today.

But let's step back a bit: why would you and your firm want to grow diversity cultural competence?

The top-of-mind answer for many is to manage the risk of allegations of harassment or discrimination from an employee or client. True, but for most, growing the skills and knowledge needed to meet legal requirements doesn't require a compelling business case. If we assume meeting legal obligations is a given, then why else would you examine the need for growing competence?

Why diversity competence matters

The reality of demographics: The changing demographics of Canada's population – your employees, suppliers, clients and community – provides a compelling reason to embrace diversity as part of a strategic advantage. As Canada's workforce ages and changes, the person or firm that can recognize, accept and use the talent of individuals and groups across the spectrum will be the one that attracts and retains that talent, attracts those clients, and has the capacity to be agile and innovative in the marketplace.

The reality of the marketplace: The competition is fierce, whether it is for talent or contracts. Technology makes information readily available and borders and boundaries disappear. The decision is often made on more than just price – the cultural fit, the relationship, the people involved, your reputation, the past and the future.

The reality of work: Employees are juggling work, life, family and change at a break-neck pace. Work is more complex, demanding continuous learning, the ability to work with shifting landscapes, access on demand, and matrixed lives. Loyalty belongs to those who earn it, and it is not only about the pay cheque. More often the question is "Is this mutually beneficial? Am I getting what I need in relation to what I give?"

Where to from here?

Longer term development of a diversity culture is about bringing out the best of individual strengths and talents to work towards common goals. Although true diversity lies not in what group individuals belong to, the issues of certain groups which share historical barriers and experiences offer a logical place to start.

Examining potential barriers in policies, practices and processes within a firm from a group perspective allows action which can signal change and create impact that helps the firm culture become one which acknowledges, accepts and leverages differences to the benefit of all. For example, historically the barriers identified as work/life issues such as the demands of child care and potential interruption of careers for child minding were seen as affecting women and thus "women's issues". However, strategies such as flexible workplace, time shifting, and improved family leave policies have, while benefiting working women, also benefited men and changed the internal cultural view in many firms regarding family obligations.

Growing diversity cultural competence doesn't happen overnight by reading a book or attending a training session. Rather it takes a conscious and consistent effort to develop a knowledge base and requisite skills.

Like many things, the place to start is with what you know.

STEREOTYPE OR CULTURAL SENSITIVITY?

Whenever a discussion about any group starts, it is imperative to consider – is this a stereotype which we are perpetuating or are we exhibiting awareness about valid cultural traditions and rituals?

How do you know? Ask yourself –

1. Is what I believe about a group based on fact?
2. Am I assuming *all* people in a certain group have this attribute?
3. Do the characteristics I ascribe to a group different from mine have a negative value?
4. How often am I reflecting on and challenging my beliefs about group attributes?
5. Do I use these 'beliefs' to make decisions or alternatively just to guide my further inquiry or validation?

Diversity Culture Competence Continuum

	Homogenous	Manage the Risk/ Employment Equity	Diversity Competence
	Exclusionary Club	Compliance Affirmative Action	Redefinition Inclusive Culture
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening What we Have. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designated Groups Statistics/Analysis/Goals Removing Discrimination Meeting legislation Assimilation of designated groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing difference Qualitative Participative Internal and External Relationships Enhancing organizational decision making and problem solving
Key Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why Change? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many do we have/need? What are the characteristics of that group? Requires Individual Change (i.e., hiring, development) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does this help our business (i.e., attraction, retention, innovation, social and corporate responsibility, reputation) Requires Organizational Change
Driving Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining/Protecting the Status Quo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government Regulation HR Lead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business Advantage Business Champions
Nature of Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes within the existing framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialized Recruitment and Training Programs Focus Groups Regulatory Reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural Change Employee Involvement Examination of Processes
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The “Right Fit” Insiders vs. Outsiders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numerical Representation Government Approval Improved environment for some Process Improvements Innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agility Employee and Client/ Customer Approval
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to attract best and brightest Ability to reflect external environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Backlash Short Term Exclusive to specific ‘designated’ Groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges the Status Quo (and what we know) Requires new skills and mindset Evolutionary

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Recognize reality

Firms, like individuals, develop a culture of their own. In fact, many take great pride in the strong culture and values that have been formed over the years. They fear that suggesting the firm needs to improve diversity cultural competence means the depreciation of history and what made the firm a success. This view clouds the ability to look at the processes in the firm with 'fresh eyes' to determine how well what is there today will serve the firm tomorrow. Recognizing the *reality* of what has changed, both in the firm and outside the firm, means you make decisions fully informed.

A major stumbling block for individuals and firms is the reluctance to admit that biases, intentional or otherwise, have influence over how you operate.

The truth is everything we do is influenced to lesser or greater degrees by what we believe, prefer or want. Accepting there is more to learn about creating an inclusive culture and that there are skills involved in being able to recognize, bridge and value the differences speaks more to the leadership required to ensure future sustainability than the flawed belief there are no biases.

To find indicators of gaps in the firm's diversity cultural competence analyze data (turnover, hire, promotion, employee satisfaction surveys, feedback) by segments such as gender, level, age, and location. If there are variances in results by groups, this indicates that the firm culture/experience is at the very least inconsistent and potentially undermining efforts. Data indicators will point to where more information is needed, such as discussion groups or comparisons with other internal or external data. This reality check needs to be completed with fresh eyes so as not to simply accept an easy explanation for the differences or data results. This is where external information and expertise is of best value in order that the 'why' questions get fully answered.

Accept the impact

With a clear understanding of what is, once individuals and firms can accept that differences have an impact – positive or negative – the opportunities start to open up. What are the barriers and challenges. Where do we need change? What is it we want/need?

There is a tendency to want to move to solutions without spending time on the impact phase; however, this is a critical

GROWING DIVERSITY CULTURAL COMPETENCE

RECOGNIZE



Reality

What are the facts?

Use internal and external data, studies and stories to establish a common understanding of what is.

Initial audience – key influencers, potential champions

Key Questions

1. What does it take to be successful here?
2. What behaviours are acceptable/unacceptable?
3. Have we gathered input from different sources and perspectives, enough to give us fresh eyes?

ACCEPT



Impact

What does it mean?

What does it mean for us (as a firm/as individuals)?

Look at talent management (i.e., succession planning, development, attraction and retention issues) innovation, reputation, and corporate citizenship implications.

Key Questions

1. How do biases get in the way of our success?
2. What is our biggest challenge?

VALUE/UTILIZE



Solutions

What are the critical initiatives to move us forward?

Determine short- and long-term goals and measures and potential challenges. Identify what needs to be general foundation work (i.e., all audiences) and where targeted or a group-specific topic is appropriate (i.e., gender communications or affinity networks).

Key Question

1. What is not on the table?

step – to ensure the reality check is valid, to establish an understanding across stakeholders regarding why the firm may change policies or practices (or why not), and to ensure actions are integrated and provide support and reinforcement rather than driving in multiple directions.

Solutions to value and utilize

With valid analysis and a solid understanding of the impact and gaps, identification of what actions are needed follows. What are the priorities? Who is involved and how?

Things to keep in mind:

- The most prevalent reasons for lack of progress for diversity initiatives are poor communication and lack of engagement of employees throughout the organization
- Growing diversity cultural competence requires a multi-year plan – establish reasonable goals and measurements and review and recalibrate based on progress

- Expect challenges – be prepared to address concerns with information and facts
- Individuals can grow personal competence; efforts at the firm level grow firm competence.

How long does it take? That depends on where the firm currently is in terms of positive human resource practices, senior leadership buy-in and the priority given to the work. Compliance work aside, many of the activities involved are things that firms may likely be doing in the normal course (recruitment, training, mentoring, communications). A diversity agenda means doing them differently using an additional critical lens and having a willingness to challenge how things have always been done.

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How do you rate your individual diversity cultural competence?

HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER?

1. I recognize my own diversity and how it impacts what I value.
2. I recognize that my values about things i.e., work, money, time, respect, family affect my decisions and behaviours.
3. I appreciate that my values might differ from a colleague or client and thus they may view things like work, money, time, respect, family differently from me.
4. I accept that my view (of work, money, time, respect, family) may not be the only one of value.
5. I recognize the challenges these differences may create even when we have similar goals in mind.
6. I take steps to learn more about 'cultures' different from mine and often reflect on how those differences might impact working with people from other 'cultures'.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

1. **Self-reflection** – Define what makes you diverse. What is your culture and how does it affect you at work? Consider how you value work, time, money, achievement. What does respect look like?
2. **Identify** a situation in the past when you felt on the outside of what was expected or valued? How did you resolve the conflict?
3. **Consider** experiencing another culture – for example volunteer at a community agency that serves people with whom you generally would not come in contact, or visit a traditional ethnic supermarket and really pay attention to the differences in service, food, language, greetings, eye contact, etc.