

Dialogue



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Researcher in intercultural communication says leaders earn employee respect by being respectful

The last thing any organizational leader wants is unproductive employees and rapid turnover. But those can be the consequences of ignoring the cultural backgrounds and values of employees, according to Valerie Barker – a San Diego State University professor and researcher in intergroup communication.

“Leaders in an organizational setting are there to provide vision for their employees; in other words, they set an example,” said Valerie. “A leader who rides roughshod over the cultural sensitivities of his or her employees must ultimately fail to persuade them of the importance of the organizational vision and, by extension, the importance of attaining organizational goals. Bottom-line, leadership is often about

compliance gaining. There’s a deadline to meet, a job to do, a program to develop, and/or a client to impress. A person who is offended by — or lacks respect for a boss or a coworker — is not motivated to work toward goals set by that boss or work with that colleague. A person who is unhappy at work, feels alienated from colleagues, or confused by behaviors or forms of communication, is an unproductive person and will not get the job done in an effective or timely fashion. And, in the final analysis, that person may leave.”

What can you do as a leader to better understand cultural differences and get a culturally diverse team of employees to adopt
(Continued)



a shared vision and shared goals? *Dialogue* recently asked Valerie to address these and other questions.

Born in Great Britain, but now an American citizen, Valerie acquired her interest in the subject of cultural sensitivity based on personal experience.

"I had some pretty 'interesting' experiences when I first came here 19 years ago," she noted. "That's what piqued my interest."

Valerie holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of London, a master's degree in Mass Communications from San Diego State, and completed her doctorate studies in Intergroup/Intercultural Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has been published in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *Language and Communication*, the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *Health Communication*, and the *Journal of Communication*. Her latest work is scheduled to appear in the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*. She has instructed at San Diego State for the past seven years and currently teaches research methods and data analysis classes to both graduate students and undergrads in the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts.

Many people might think of cultural differences as a negative and maybe a hindrance to achieving company goals. But what are some of the organizational positives that can be derived from embracing employees from different cultures?

It is true that cultural differences can be regarded as an obstacle to be overcome. However, rigid thinking and inflexible, rule-bound behaviors can prove to be even more negative in terms of achieving organizational goals.

I'm a big fan of Ellen Langer, a Harvard-based social psychologist. She proposes that we should practice *mindfulness* as a social skill. By this, she means that we should be open and attuned to differences and resist the temptation to use a "cookie-cutter" approach to social relationships. If we accept diversity as a positive, that means that we are better able to find alternative solutions and approaches to goal attainment. Put another way, there is always more than one way of solving a problem or finding an answer.

The term global village is perhaps a cliché, but it is also a reality. Typically, a large U.S. company is a microcosm of that. If we can recognize, value, and accommodate diversity within the organization, we are better equipped to communicate and work with our organizational stakeholders . . . both nationally and internationally.

For example, a new Goodrich plant is opening in Mexicali. Mexico is a collectivistic society, where relationships, family and group belonging mean much. This spills over into business relationships. If Aerostructures can be mindful of this, then you'll be able to accommodate these values when forging an effective business partnership. This is perhaps something that your leaders can keep in mind when interacting with Mexican-American colleagues, as well. Minds that ignore or are closed to diversity and difference, close the door to progress, gain and achievement.



You mentioned Mexico. Which foreign cultures would you say are most similar to America's and which are most different?

In a seminal study of national cultures, Geert Hofstede – a long-time scholar in intercultural communication in business settings — ranked a large number of countries along a variety of cultural dimensions. One of these dimensions was *individualism*. Individualism implies personal achievement and success, competition, self-reliance, and solving problems alone. Not surprisingly, America was at the top of the list. But Australia, Great Britain, Canada and the Netherlands followed closely behind. Clearly, there are cultural differences between these countries. But, on balance, there are probably more similarities.

By contrast, in Hofstede's study, Middle Eastern (e.g., Iran), South American (e.g., Guatemala, Venezuela), and Asian (e.g., Taiwan, Singapore) countries appeared very low on the individualism index. This is because these latter countries score high on the *collectivism* dimension. Collectivism implies that individuals find security in group belonging, getting along is valued, and self-sacrifice in favor of the group is expected.

What are some general guidelines leaders can follow in interacting with employees from various cultures?

One of the most valued approaches in any kind of social relationship is respect. People will forgive a lot if they believe that you genuinely intend to be respectful. Leaders are role models and, therefore, I believe that it behooves them to practice respectful behavior. This does not imply any form of diminished authority, by the way. On the contrary, leaders earn respect by being respectful.

With that said, knowledge and mindfulness are truly important. But one can't possibly know and understand *every* form of cultural behavior that predominates in every country in the world. You can, however, accrue some basic knowledge about what directs people in terms of a cultural compass.

A French cultural commentator — Raymonde Carroll — wrote: *"My culture is the logic by which I give order to the world."* I think having knowledge of the *overall* cultural value dimensions that research has highlighted as "out there" provides a starting point.

For instance, one important issue which is key in many societies is the concept of "face." We're all familiar with the term "saving face." This is very much part of daily interaction for certain cultures and relates to the importance placed upon politeness and harmony. In such societies, when discussing something that might be construed as negative, people will go to great lengths to convey the meaning in a way that saves the other person's face.

Here's an example supplied by one of my Chinese graduate students:

"We try to treat everyone very politely, though we get mad at some of them. We try to take other peoples' feelings and thoughts into account by saying the same thing in different ways, and do all we can to leave good impressions to others. Like in class, we are not used to arguing, but listening — and give great respect to the professors. So, I was shocked in the beginning to experience Americans' (straight forwardness in terms of) writing all their emotions on their faces. They express their unwillingness so obviously, and sometimes show their anger or bad mood to people who have nothing to do with it. For me, they seldom consider other people enough . . ."

I use this example as a way to illustrate cultural awareness in a general sense. By that, I mean: if you feel that you're not getting an answer to your question — or a quick, direct answer — there is a cultural reason why. This isn't a person trying to avoid answering or trying to be uncooperative. Be aware that it may be a

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person who is negotiating face — that is, saving *your* face. At that point, it's probably time to back off and find a third party to mediate the situation for you.

What are some of the most common stereotypes/misconceptions that you find Americans have about people from various cultural backgrounds?

We use our cultural orientation as a baseline to judge others. This is necessary because we can't rethink and relearn every situation — we need a road map. There has to be stuff that “goes without saying.” And, for the most part, that works and saves us a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. Unfortunately, the “everyone knows that” approach also leads to misunderstandings and, sometimes, conflict.

I think one of the biggest mistakes is to assume that all people from one culture or one nation are all “the same.” For example, someone might think: “*You Brits are all the same - that sarcastic John Cleese humor, yeah.*” But this is truly problematic. Why? A person from Wales or Scotland might agree, but then again, may definitely disagree. Some might regard John Cleese as an upper class Oxbridge twit (to use a cultural epithet). Some may think he IS the Holy Grail. In other words, some people may fit the mold in terms of being culturally committed and some may not.

To cite another example, think about the North/South and East/West divides in America. People in New York don't necessarily operate in the way that people in L.A. do. But can we then make the assumption — as the character played by actor John Lithgow in the film *Terms of Endearment* does — that if you're a very rude person, then you must be from New York?

Another common attitude is: “*Why can't they be more like us?*” Of course, the problem with that is that “they” are probably wondering the same thing.

I think the moral of the story is that we must develop cultural “antennae” that act as sensors. We don't have to become like the other person necessarily. Indeed, that might be construed as insulting (especially in Japan). And you don't necessarily have to approve or like the behavior. But it's important to try to *understand* it.

What are the best ways to get a culturally diverse team of employees to adopt a shared vision and shared goals?

I think that *transparency* is very important in terms of the way decisions are made about who will take on which role. That is, everyone should be aware of the reasons for the division of labor — the skills that are necessary and why certain people are considered to have those skills. That means positive reinforcement for tasks well done. I believe that by doing this, individuals who are from cultures that are not mainstream — or those born outside of the U.S. — will better understand the organizational vision and ultimate goals.

But it's also important to foster a sense of group, rather than individual achievement. This means that everyone should have a “voice” — not in the sense of a democracy, but in the sense of being heard. Americans are accustomed to being able to voice their opinions in a fairly direct fashion, but members of

other cultures are not comfortable with that type of communication. Therefore, it might be a good idea to encourage other channels of communication — face-to-face or otherwise. Some individuals may feel better about communicating their ideas one-on-one or in writing. If a leader is seen to be willing to “go the extra mile” *even if it takes up valuable time*, I believe this will pay off in terms of support, loyalty and productivity.

Obviously, a willingness to learn the differences between cultures is one of the keys to bridging cultures. What resources are available to Aerostructures leaders seeking to better understand cultural differences?

There have been a couple of short books written for business people that are easy reading and contain examples. These include *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide* by C. Storti and *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business* by F. Trompenaars.

Cultural differences are not limited to face-to-face contexts, they occur in virtual environments, as well. And Gert Jan Hofstede (son of Geert Hofstede) has developed role-play games which relate to international work groups. You can find these at: <http://www.info.wau.nl/people/gertjan/wit.html>.

Meanwhile, Geert Hofstede himself is still going strong. You can visit his web page for lots of interesting stuff. It's at: <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>.

Finally, it's helpful to see how American culture is explained to international students and scholars who plan a sojourn here. You can learn quite a lot about international visitors by finding out what THEY need to know about US. Here's a link from University of Texas that does just that: <http://www.uta.edu/oie/handbook/chapter3.htm>.