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## Chapter 8

### The Future of Cultural Intelligence

One day an elephant saw a hummingbird lying flat on its back on the ground; its feet in the air.

“What are you doing,” asked the elephant.

The hummingbird replied, “I heard that the sky might fall today. If that happens, I am ready to do my part to hold it up.”

The elephant laughed and mocked the bird. “You think those feet can hold up the sky?”

“Not alone,” said the bird. “But we must each do what we can, and this is what I can do.”

- Adapted from R. MacDonald, Three minute tales

How can we ensure that our leadership matters at a very deep level? What can we do to cultivate awareness for cultural intelligence in all individuals within our organizations? As this Chinese fable tells, we have a responsibility to one another.

This book began with the idea that there are important factors changing the way we do our work, the way we connect with one another, and how we perceive one another. Technological, political, and environmental changes are fueling a global economy that is quickly flattening; our interdependence with one another goes beyond our relationships in the workplace. All of these factors create new world experiences.

When asked to describe the “person of tomorrow,” Carl Rogers, Rogers (1980), p. 350. one of the founders of the field of humanistic psychology, said that in the new world, people will have a desire for creating wholeness in life, thought, and feelings. This “person of tomorrow” will have a need to find and create new experiences that bring a deeper understanding of humanity to work. Similarly, Frances Hasselbein, the former CEO of Girl Scouts, said that people in our societies are looking to find

themselves. There is a thirst for personal and inner knowledge and a thirst to understand how this information will uncover a more profound awareness for how we relate to one another.

There are four areas in which cultural intelligence will significantly improve our understanding of culture and intercultural work. These areas are reframing, adaptive work, systems thinking, and consciousness.

## 8.1 Reframing

Leaders must be able to reframe their thinking and practice of culture. Cultural intelligence is a tool that helps move leaders from a place of single perspective to one that has multiple filters for sorting through and navigating the cultural intelligence labyrinth. The idea and the practice of shifting your perspective (**reframing**<sup>1</sup>) Bolman and Deal (2008). allows leaders to move from mindlessness to mindfulness. It enables leaders to identify old thought patterns that lead to destructive and negative behaviors, which, in turn, impact and influence one's leadership.

One of the areas that cultural intelligence can help us reframe is the changing demographics and environmental landscape we experience as a society. As we see globalization's effects in the world, we must reframe how to think about and include different stakeholders in our work. Who we involve matters. Who we ask to be part of the conversation matters. And, most importantly, how we engage them is critical. Cultural intelligence, when used, can help to move people from the margins of work to the center, thus engaging them and creating systems of inclusion rather than representation.

I found reframing to be beneficial to leaders when developing long-lasting and meaningful intercultural relationships. For this to happen, it is vital for leaders and organizations to change their thinking about and practices concerning relationships. Leaders can create a shift in cultivating authentic relationships with different cultural groups or individuals when the questions asked are shifted from "how can this relationship help me to reach my organizational (personal) goals" to "what can I (we) learn from this relationship, and how can the learning move us toward our vision?"

I suggested this question to a woman who manages volunteers in a nonprofit. In our brief conversation, she realized that asking the question in this way helped her to see culture and diversity as a process rather than an outcome. She realized that it was important to build relationships for diversity work, but in doing so the relationships built can have a larger impact than the diversity efforts themselves. By asking questions such as "what forms of relationships need to exist in this organization," "what do relationships mean to this organization," and "how do people in this organization work together" enables the organization to become a learning organization based around diversity and culture.

1. A communication technique in which an individual shifts or reinterprets old thought patterns to revise an outdated or limiting belief, idea, or perspective.

Asking these questions enables people to be more authentic and understanding of how relationships are created. This is a critical element in cultural intelligence work as it helps leaders to tap into the power that relationships have in building trust and unity. When we engage in this type of work, we reframe how we think about culture as it relates to power, decision making, authority, and leadership. We reframe who our values speak to and who they exclude, and we gain clarity about where our responsibility within our societies exists.

## 8.2 Adaptive Work

It is clear that the practice of cultural intelligence forces leaders to be more adaptive to their surroundings. **Adaptive work**<sup>2</sup> requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior. Heifetz (1994), p. 22. Furthermore, it requires leaders to lead through conflicting values held by different groups and to eliminate the gap between the values people have and the realities of their lives. Ronald Heifetz wrote, “Adapting to human challenges requires that we go beyond the requirements of simply surviving. We perceive problems whenever circumstances do not conform to the way we think things ought to be. Thus, adaptive work involves not only the assessment of reality but also the clarification of values.” Heifetz (1994), p. 31.

Leaders are defined by their values, their beliefs, and their character. To be culturally intelligent means that you must constantly review, revise, and reflect upon your personal value systems and how these systems impact your cultural interactions. Leaders must understand and articulate what values drive their behaviors and attitudes. This means that leaders must question and challenge, that they explore the deeper stories that give life to their belief systems, and that they are courageous enough to give themselves a “reality check” for any dissonance surfacing between their beliefs and actions.

Too often, I see organizations develop assessments and tools to measure the effectiveness of “the organization as a system,” and forget about the most important system, the “personal value system” that drives most of organizational processes and thinking. By doing this, organizational leaders expect the organization to adapt but do not have the support of its workers. We need to be reminded that organizational systems come about because there are people within the organization who are driven by their personal values and beliefs. Organizations can adapt if the people within them are given the opportunity and resources to adapt.

2. An aspect of cultural intelligence that requires a change in values, beliefs, and behaviors to move through conflicting values held by different groups.

## 8.3 Interdependency

Martin Luther King, Jr., said that “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Relationships and interdependence are at the core of our survival. Peter Senge wrote that leaders of the future must have the skill set to “see patterns of interdependency.” Senge (1990), p. 39. We live in an interdependent world; our actions and choices know no boundaries. Senge suggests that we must see the connections and relationships between, among, and within systems—cultural, political, legal, social, economic, familial, and so on. We need to be able to live effectively with one another, and if we can “see systemic patterns and understand the forces driving a system,” we can “start to see where the system is headed if nothing changes.” Senge (1990), p. 39.

To begin to see interdependence, culturally intelligent leaders need to be clear about their purpose in working with cultural groups, people, and processes. Purpose, in culturally intelligent leadership, is to understand oneself in relationship to what is being sought. In other words, understanding and exploring your motivations, your passion, and your personal journey must serve as a foundation for reaching the desired vision to create cultural understanding and awareness. You must personally explore and identify what it would mean to the organization, and most importantly to its people, if diversity and culture of thoughts, ideas, people, systems did not exist.

Simply asking yourself and others, “if we did not do this work, what would be lost,” can help people to understand the systemic nature of culture. I once worked with a manager who asked this question of himself, and then his staff. The result was a deep and authentic dialogue about the responsibility that each person brings to the process. They understood that culture and diversity was not something to control or “manage,” rather it was a human element that needed to be nurtured and cared for by everyone. The intercultural work to be explored involved everyone no matter what level of cultural consciousness they came into the organization with. In the end, people in the organization gained an understanding for the different notions of diversity, a more clear purpose and passion for intercultural interactions, and enthusiastic support for creating a culturally inclusive environment.

## 8.4 Consciousness

As we progress in our understanding of culture we learn through our cognition what it takes to be a leader in an intercultural world. What is required, as evident in the idea of cultural intelligence, is a more holistic, paradoxical picture of leadership. The picture is one that must engage people's whole self, including the emotional, physical, mental, social, and spiritual domains.

This picture of leadership also forces us to recognize that the opposites we see, for example individualism and collectivism, are not in conflict; rather, they complement each other, enabling us to look at our individual and group strengths and our weaknesses in its totality. Opposites are not to demonstrate a "better than the other" dichotomy; instead, opposites create harmony, helping us to discover where we have been out of balance. Culturally intelligent leaders know they must balance the paradoxes of life: judge and learn, individual and group, strength and weakness, old and new, mindfulness and mindlessness, possible and impossible, and so on.

We are, as Carl Rogers noted, in a time where **consciousness**<sup>3</sup> is critical to our self-development and, thus, the development of others. Through consciousness-raising activities such as cultural intelligence, we have the opportunity to let go of our limiting thoughts and behaviors. This consciousness creation is what Mary Parker Follet noted as both the social and political force of the future. It is through this creation, a collective conscious, that creative forces will emerge and work through the chaos and complexity of our times.

3. Awareness of one's self, including one's thoughts, feelings, and situation. This awareness can also apply to a larger group, such as a nation.

## 8.5 A Return to the Cultural Labyrinth

Joseph Campbell (1988) said that by going down into the abyss, we remember the treasures of life. In cultural intelligence, leaders must be able to raise their levels of collective cultural consciousness by seeking out the challenges, or our “abyss”. It is often difficult to disclose one’s weaknesses, one’s fears, and one’s vulnerabilities concerning cultural diversity: The abyss is not really a comfortable place to be, but it does serve as an opportunity to explore one’s self-concept. Cultural intelligence provides leaders with a chance to expand their capacities to become better cross-cultural leaders.

In the end, when you reach your destination, you will be changed. In our cultural intelligence journey, we all return to our core, our home, our center. We come back not as the same person, because the world we left that was familiar to us is now unfamiliar. Campbell said that when we return to our true selves—our authentic selves—we need to be willing to rid ourselves of the life we have planned in order to enjoy the life that waits. Once you begin the work of cultural intelligence, you can no longer be the same person; you cannot go back to who you were and pick up the pieces as you left them. Your leadership story is different, and how you engage with people of different cultural backgrounds will be different.

If you truly do work that is culturally intelligent, work that is meaningful and intentional, then you will come to realize that differences in cultures promote a diversity of thinking, innovative practices, and ideas that take you out of mindlessness. Cultural intelligence keeps you alert and attentive to challenges in order to help you reach your highest potential. In business, culture’s impact is to constantly test an organization’s ability to be adaptable and flexible—to be the best by letting go of old assumptions and biases. It has always been the role of culture to help us let go of what we think we know and open our eyes to the responsibility we all have, as leaders, in shaping a better society.