

Reading Lesson

B1+ Business: Cultural Intelligence in Business

Reading

Read the text. What does cultural intelligence mean and what type of problems may it cause?

Cultural Intelligence in Business

In many countries, two things are happening that mean businesses are having to pay more attention to the way people from different cultures work together. The first is that the workforce is becoming more diverse in many places. People from different ethnic backgrounds and with different kinds of life experiences are now working side by side more often. The second is that employees in many companies are more likely these days to be required to work with international co-workers based in other countries. This may involve traveling to another country to work with people there, or it may involve working online with people from various countries.



Businesses can't afford to ignore the effects this has on the workplace. When members of a team all have different expectations and different ways of working, the team will almost certainly be less effective. It can mean that it takes longer to complete a project, or in extreme cases, it can mean that a project fails to achieve its goals. Things like that cost a business money and prevent it from putting its strategy into practice.

Understanding the way different cultures interact is sometimes referred to as "cultural intelligence." One area of cultural intelligence that can cause problems is the way in which people of different cultures react to physical space and touch. We all have our own sense of a comfortable distance from the person we are talking to, and that varies across cultures. If your idea of a comfortable distance differs from the other person's, that person might think you are being pushy or being cold toward him or her. Greetings and gestures can also cause problems, as different cultures have different ideas on how appropriate shaking hands, kissing, or bowing are in a business context.

Questions about this kind of interaction may be fairly easy to answer from information in books or online sources, where you'll discover, for example, that Japanese businesspeople expect you to handle their business cards with respect and may be offended if you simply put a card in your pocket without reading it carefully. There are other aspects of workplace culture that are less obvious, but which have a big effect on the success of a project, including attitudes to time management and relationships between senior and junior members of staff.

The first step in improving your own cultural intelligence is to think about your own culture. This involves asking yourself questions about how you see other people in your organization, how you usually interact with them, and what expectations you share with other people. It's important to consider the unwritten rules of the workplace. For example, it may be unacceptable in your organization for a junior employee to raise questions about the plans of senior employees. Co-workers from other cultures may need to know that kind of detail to avoid offending people.

The next step is to learn about other cultures and their ways of working. This involves having an open mind and recognizing that there is more than one way of achieving a goal. Careful observation of how people behave can teach you a lot. Watching how people interact at work can provide a good example to follow. You should also bear in mind that most people are very happy to answer questions about their own culture. People generally understand that it's not always easy to work with people from different backgrounds, but a willingness to learn goes a long way. Of course, it's important during this process to remember the risks of stereotyping people. When we stereotype a person, we make a judgment about how they may feel or act based on our knowledge not of them but of their culture in general. Although we can say that people from certain cultures often or usually share some ideas, it would be a mistake to assume that any one individual from that country or culture necessarily feels or behaves that way. You should always remember that there can be great differences in the way that people from the same culture think, just as there are great differences between you and some people from your own culture.

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Vocabulary

Choose the correct option.

1. A ... country is one where there are many different kinds of people living.
a different b divided c diverse
2. Your ... group is the people who have the same culture and traditions as you.
a ethnic b background c customs
3. Someone who is ... to you is older or in a higher position.
a above b senior c over
4. Someone who is ... to you is younger or in a lower position.
a below b under c junior
5. When you ... someone, you upset that person by doing something that is not appropriate in his or her culture.
a defend b pretend c offend

Comprehension

Choose the correct option.

1. The main idea of the reading shows that these days, you are more likely to work **with different kinds of people / only with people in your own country**.
2. People sometimes judge your character based on **your appearance / how close you stand**.
3. The example of business cards shows **how easily the Japanese are offended / the kind of offense it is easy to avoid**.
4. When you think about your own work culture, you may realize **what other people need to know / how important it is to follow rules**.
5. It's important to realize that **people will learn to do things correctly if you show them how / methods you don't normally use can be successful**.

Thinking

What are some of the main characteristics of the work culture in your country?