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“CQ” CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: Another Aspect of Emotional Intelligence

A further add-on to our series on the TEAM International® website around Emotional Intelligence is the concept of Cultural Intelligence, or CQ, suggested by P.Christopher Earley (London Business School) and Elaine Mosakowski (University of Colorado at Boulder.)¹

According to Earley and Mosakowski, CQ is related to EQ, Emotional Intelligence, but for cultural differences picks up where EQ leaves off; it is the “...seemingly natural ability for an outsider to a culture to interpret someone’s unfamiliar and ambiguous actions or gestures the way that person’s cultural compatriots would”. This might happen across national cultures, such as an American in Mexico or even inside co-cultures, such as in different areas (or ethnicities) in the U.S.

The authors give an example of the latter: a sales manager from a California medical devices group owned by Eli Lilly Pharmaceuticals who was accustomed to a very competitive environment where senior managers hounded unproductive sales people to perform better and rewarded them heavily when they did. However, at the Company’s HQ in Indianapolis, to which the sales manager was transferred, criticism was restrained and confrontation was kept to a minimum. To motivate people, Lilly management encouraged sales people and rewarded them marginally in monetary terms. The transferred sales manager expressed his (cultural) dilemma: “Back in L.A., I knew how to handle myself and manage my sales team. I’d push and confront them if they weren’t performing, and they’d respond. I was evaluated highly and people respected me. Here in Indianapolis, they don’t like my style, and they seem to avoid the challenges I put to them. I just can’t seem to get things done as well here as I did in California.”

(In a training program, we at TEAM International® had a similar concern expressed by a West Coast division manager whose headquarters were located in Akron, Ohio. Upon reflection of cultural differences around the importance of time in these co-cultures, he understood why his Ohio colleagues perceived his division as “really laid back”.) Earley and Mosakowski divide the dilemma faced by both the above managers in 3 parts, or components, of “cultural intelligence”:

Cognitive (the “head”) -- understanding differences between cultures; this might involve, for example, asking questions about what motivates people in different environments. Going beyond the case of the U.S. sales manager above, in Indonesia, for example, rewarding an individual for outstanding performance may be tantamount to shaming him/her in front of his colleagues, whom he considers team or “family” members – celebrating his success as an individual is to recognize the failure of others not so successful. (Further to the time example above, administrative people in Columbus, Ohio, couldn’t understand why no one was working in their Mexico office in the “middle of the afternoon” – the standard Mexico City time for the most important meal of the

day, over which a lot of business – and relationship activity supporting the business is frequently carried out.)

Physical (the “body”) – many cultural differences are reflected by observable physical actions. Touch is one of the most important of these: in Latin America, and sometimes in other places, like France, it is customary for male and female colleagues to greet each other with a hug and a kiss on one (or both) cheeks. In Britain or the U.S., this cultural custom might not be as well received and even perhaps convey dreaded overtones of sexual harassment.

Emotional/motivational (the “heart”) – this may be the hardest, or most subtle component of cultural intelligence – it is also perhaps the most akin to Emotional (or Social) Intelligence. Here lies the ability to empathize, to stand in another’s shoes, to want to connect with another person even though that person may look, talk, act differently than self. It is here where we may find the biggest gap between people who inhabit different cultural spaces and the most to be gained and given in developing cultural intelligence.

Beyond these components, however, lies a whole system and process of cultural development. This process has been well captured and formulated by Milton Bennett and his colleagues at the Intercultural Communication Institute (Portland, OR). Bennett’s concept of “intercultural development” projects one’s (cross-)cultural intelligence across a path of personal development from “Denial”, i.e. knowing virtually nothing about other cultures, to “Integration”, where one is fully able to move among or between different cultures, incorporating in his/her expertise the Earley and Mosakowski components above. What sets the Bennett model apart is his emphasis on the developmental aspect of cross-cultural “intelligence” and on the ability to not only understand cultural differences, but also to adapt one’s behaviors appropriately in order to “fit in” in the other culture. Bennett also offers the possibility to diagnose cultural intelligence or readiness and the means to move forward in that development. (What would we prescribe as a development plan, for example, for the California sales manager above to help him/her be able to function in another environment?)*

*Cross-cultural development is at the heart of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), developed by Milton Bennett and offered as part of a personal or group development process by TEAM International®. See our website article **DIAGNOSING AND DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERTISE IN GLOBAL LEADERS**.

¹*Harvard Business Review*, October 2004.