



# Dimensions in Cultural Competency

## From Diversity & Diversity Awareness to Cultural Competency

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During the last quarter of the 20th century, diversity became a watchword in both public and private institutions. Consequently most institutions and organizations developed policies and programs acknowledging diversity in race, gender, age, sexual orientation, parental status, religious beliefs, etc. As the 21st century begins, organizations face a more compelling challenge: *How to move beyond diversity awareness and achieve cultural competency in the workplace.*

Data from the 2000 Census reveals an America that is increasingly diverse racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically, making the need for individuals to be culturally competent a practical imperative.

According to the 2000 Census:

- ▶ 17.4 million workers (12.4% of the civilian labor force) were foreign-born
- ▶ More than 20% of the U.S. population is foreign-born or has at least one foreign-born parent
- ▶ The number of persons who speak a language other than English at home exceeds 30 million
- ▶ At the national level in 2000, 65% of the foreign born over the age of five who speak a language other than English at home speak English “very well” or “well.”

In the following pages we’ll take a closer look at why it’s important to move from “diversity awareness” to being “culturally competent” and why that is important in today’s organizational culture. We’ll begin with some basics: First we’ll take a brief look at the concept of “culture,” - what it is and what it means. We’ll also look at some central concepts of culture – in the organizational or workplace context. Next, we’ll examine why it’s important to be “culturally competent” today, especially in the workplace. Lastly, we’ll take a look at how cultural competency, cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity differ from one another.

## What Is Culture?

Culture is a curious and misunderstood thing. Each of us has complex cultures, but often we believe culture is something only others have. We look to those who are ethnically and/or racially different from us and think culture is all about **them**, when in fact every single one of us has an ethnic background whether it is Irish, Swiss or a combo of the two.

So what is **culture**? At its simplest, culture is the environment that surrounds you all the time.

The word “culture” stems from the Latin **colere** which means “**to cultivate**.” Over time, the term has had different meanings. Although researchers have identified over 150 definitions of “culture,” the word is now most commonly used in three basic senses:

- ▶ *Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities*
- ▶ *An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning*
- ▶ *The integrated pattern of human behavior that includes attitudes, action, assumptions, values, reasoning, practices, goals and communication of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group, institution or organization.*

### A useful means of understanding what culture is

is to think of it as consisting of four elements that are “passed on from generation to generation by learning alone.” These four elements are: **VALUES, NORMS, INSTITUTIONS** and **ARTIFACTS**.



- ▶ **Values** comprise ideas about what in life seems important.
- ▶ **Norms** consist of expectations of how people will behave in various situations.
- ▶ **Institutions** are the structures of a society within which values and norms are transmitted.
- ▶ **Artifacts**—things, or aspects of material culture derived from a culture's values and norms.

*Culture has been called “the way of life for an entire society.” Culture includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behaviors and systems of belief. Culture refers to the universal human ability to organize, classify and communicate experiences symbolically.*

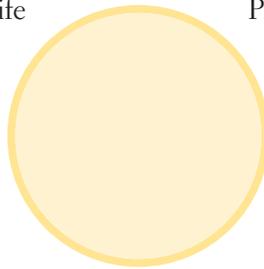
*“Culture” can be likened to personality; an individual's personality is made up of the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, interests, experiences, upbringing, and habits that create his/her behavior.*



## Central Concepts of Culture: The Workplace Context

*In the workplace or organizational context “culture is the behavior that results when a group arrives at a set of - generally unspoken and unwritten - rules for working together.”*

An organization’s culture is made up of all of the life experiences, strengths, weaknesses, education, upbringing and expectations each employee brings to the organization. In the workplace or organizational context it is a powerful element that shapes your work enjoyment, your work relationships, and your work processes.



Professors Ken Thompson (DePaul University) and Fred Luthans (University of Nebraska) who are recognized experts in the field of management and organizational behavior have identified seven characteristics of culture. Cast in the workplace context these characteristics are:

- 1. Culture = Behavior** — “Culture” is the term used to describe the operational norms of an environment—in this case, the workplace. It is neither bad nor good, though elements of the culture may hinder or impede success or progress while others enhance them. For example, a norm of accountability will help an organization to be successful while a norm tolerating poor performance will cripple success throughout the organization.
- 2. Culture is Learned** — People learn to perform certain behaviors through either the rewards or negative consequences that follow their behavior. When a behavior is rewarded, it is repeated, and the association eventually becomes part of the culture.
- 3. Culture is Learned through Interaction** — Employees learn about an organization’s culture by interacting with other employees. Most behaviors and rewards in organizations involve other employees. (An initial opinion of your culture can be formed as early as the first phone call from the Human Resources department.)
- 4. Sub-cultures Form Through Rewards**— Sometimes employees value rewards that are not associated with the behaviors desired by managers for the overall company. This is often how subcultures are formed. Subcultures become the place where people find their social needs or wants met by coworkers or have their most important needs met in their departments or project teams.
- 5. People Shape the Culture** — Personalities and experiences of employees create the culture of an organization. If most of the people in an organization are very outgoing, the culture is likely to be open and sociable. Or if many artifacts depicting the company’s history and values are in evidence throughout, the company’s history and culture is a high value.
- 6. Culture is negotiated** — One person cannot create a culture alone. Culture change is a process of give and take by all members of an organization. Absent give and take and buy-in by all members of an organization, employees will not own necessary changes.
- 7. Culture is Difficult to Change** — It is difficult for people to unlearn the existing ways of doing things, and to perform new behaviors consistently. Persistence, discipline, employee involvement, kindness and understanding, organization development work, and training can aid in changing a company or departmental culture.

All employees contribute to organizational culture but an organization’s culture is especially influenced by the organization’s founder, executives, and other managerial staff because of their role in decision making and strategic direction.

## Central Concepts of Culture: The Workplace Context (continued)

Within a group, e.g., a workplace, a group's culture is manifest by: (a) **Language**, (b) **decision –making**, (c) **stories and legends**, (d) **symbols**, and (e) **daily work practices**.

No two employees will interpret an organization's culture in exactly the same way. Events external to the workplace affect how people act and interact at work. Although an organization has a common culture, **each person will view the organization's culture through the "filter" of his/her personal "culture."**



Additionally, organizations have cultures within cultures which also act as filters; **each division, department or service within an organization will have its own culture**—these sub-cultures will also be perceived differently by each employee. Therefore, not only will an organization's culture be seen differently by individual employees, but also by subdivisions (subcultures) of the organization.

An organization's culture may be strong or weak. The culture of a work place can be described as

strong when most people in the group agree on the culture. When a workplace culture is weak, people are not in agreement on the culture. Sometimes, the culture of a company as a whole might be weak and very difficult to characterize because of the presence of many subcultures within it. Individual departments or work units may have their own culture. Further stratification may take place within departments, for staff and managers may each have their own culture.

Ideally, organizational culture supports a positive, productive, environment. In the quest to develop an ideal culture, it is important to remember this corollary: Happy employees are not necessarily productive employees. Productive employees are not necessarily happy employees. Thus it is important to find aspects of the culture that will support each of these qualities for employees within an organization. Therefore it is important to identify characteristics of the culture that will support each of these qualities for employees within an organization.



*In the organizational context, Cross, et al define cultural competence, as:*

*"[A] set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations."*

## Cultural Competence: What Is It & How Do You Define It?

Over the years, “cultural competence” has been variously defined and worn different names including the following: “multicultural competence,” “intercultural competence” or “cross-cultural competence.” Most definitions have a common element, which requires the adjustment or recognition of one’s own culture in order to understand the culture of another.

Some definitions underscore the knowledge and skills needed to interact with people of different cultures, others focus on attitudes. Others ascribe cultural competence or a lack thereof to policies and organizations. (See definitions below.) Cultural competence can and should occur in both individuals and organizations.



*The concept of “cultural competence” has its roots in the field of healthcare. It isn’t surprising that mental health and medical care professionals were at the forefront of promoting cultural competence. The consequences of a poor diagnosis due to lack of cultural understanding, or because of breakdowns in staff-to-staff or staff-to-patient communication, have proved costly to the patient; such breakdowns in understanding or communication have proved fatal.*

- ▶ “A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together as a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. (T.L. Cross, et al., 1989)<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ “Cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period. Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills along the cultural competence continuum. (Betancourt, J., Green, A. & Carrillo, E. 2002).<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ “Cultural competence is defined simply as the level of knowledge-based skills required to provide effective clinical care to patients from a particular ethnic or racial group.” (D. Denboba, 1993)<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ In a 2007 article in “Strategic Diversity & Inclusion Management,” Mercedes Martin & Billy Vaughn offer this definition: “Cultural competence refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. Cultural competence is comprised of four components: (a) Awareness of one’s own cultural worldview, (b) Attitude towards cultural differences, (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and; (d) Cross-cultural Skills.

## Definitions

According to Martin and Vaughn:

**Awareness:** Awareness is consciousness of one's personal reactions to people who are different. A police officer who recognizes that he profiles people who look like they are from an Arab country as “terrorists” has cultural awareness of his reactions to this group of people.

**Attitude:** Attitude is more than becoming aware of our reactions to those who are different from us; awareness nudges us to think carefully about our beliefs and values about cultural differences.

**Knowledge:** Social science research indicates that our values and beliefs about culture may be inconsistent with our behaviors, and paradoxically we may be unaware of it. Research done by social psychologist, Patricia Devine, and her colleagues showed that many people who score low on a prejudice test tend to do things in cross cultural encounters that exemplify prejudice (e.g., using out-dated labels such as “illegal aliens”, “colored,” or “retarded.” This makes the Knowledge component an important part of cultural competence development.

**Skills:** This component concentrates on practicing cultural competence. Communication is the fundamental tool by which people interact in organizations. This includes gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication which tend to vary by culture.

Along the continuum of cultural competence, individuals and organizations are various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills. Mastery of these four components of cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over time.



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<sup>1</sup> Cited in. CULTURAL COMPETENCE: The Nuts & Bolts of Diversity & Inclusion. M. Martin, B. Vaughn. [http://diversityofficemagazine.com/magazine/?page\\_id=391](http://diversityofficemagazine.com/magazine/?page_id=391). (Retrieved 7/12/09).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



## Not Just Diversity: The Value of Cultural Competency in the Workplace

As the U.S. enters the 21st century, it looks very much different demographically than it did when it entered the 20th century. Data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute<sup>4</sup> from the US Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey<sup>5</sup> and the Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>6</sup> reveals the U.S. to be linguistically, ethnically, racially and culturally different.

- ▶ There were 38.1 foreign born immigrants<sup>7</sup> in the United States, which represents 12.6% of the total US population.
- ▶ Of the 22.5 million civilian employed foreign born age 16 and older in 2007, 27.2 percent worked in management, professional, and related occupations; 23.1 percent worked in service occupations; 18.0 percent worked in sales and office occupations; 16.4 percent worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations; and 13.4 percent worked in construction, extraction, and maintenance occupations.
- ▶ In 2008, 24.1 million persons, or 15.6 percent of the U.S. civilian labor force age 16 and over, were foreign born. The unemployment rate for the foreign born was 5.8 percent in 2008, up from 4.3 percent in 2007. The jobless rate of the native born also increased to 5.8 percent in 2008; it was 4.7 percent in the prior year.<sup>8</sup>

*“Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations”*

*[Cross T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M. (1989)]*

If the growing demographic diversity were not reason enough for individuals and organizations to strive to become culturally competent, cultural competency is also needed to address subtleties of mores and attitude that contribute to American culture and society and to destructive biases.



Consider these examples: an immigrant who speaks English with an accent or a woman with a high-pitched child-like voice. Is the immigrant uneducated? Is the woman incompetent? So subtle are these kinds of bias that many individuals who respond 'yes' to these scenarios may not even realize they have engaged in biased thinking.

## Diversity vs. cultural competency:

Diversity has become shorthand for a wide spectrum of human and social differences. Therefore, for organizational leaders, **the first step toward cultural competency is to distinguish it from traditional diversity.** Most organizations concede that it makes sense to recognize groups that may have been ignored, disenfranchised or discriminated against. Diversity initiatives vary from organization to organization, ranging from building awareness and tolerance to intentionally appointing or recruiting representatives from diverse groups for organizational programs or activities.



Conventional diversity misses the mark: Although an organization may be successful in achieving “diversity” as measured by race, gender or other dimensions, an organization lacking in cultural competency will experience a host of challenges, including interpersonal conflicts, high staff turnover, substandard customer service and even lawsuits.

Cultural Competency goes beyond the concept of diversity. Cultural references shape an individual's attitudes, beliefs, values and worldview. **A culturally competent organization recognizes that the cultural perspectives that influence the way we each think, interact and make choices are both subtle and obvious.**

Diversity has an incomplete lens: Diversity seldom addresses issues such as linguistic profiling, use of time; attitudes toward personal space; attitudes about those with disabilities; interaction with authorities and the law; and non-verbal communications. Cultural competency acknowledges these elements as significant.

The goals and activities of diversity programming frequently concentrate on:

- ▶ Understanding minorities, e.g., from a historical perspective
- ▶ Ensuring that communications feature images of recognizably diverse people and are produced in multiple languages
- ▶ Reaching a target number or percentage of a specific group such as women, minorities, handicapped, etc.
- ▶ Putting “ethnic minorities” in visible positions
- ▶ Gathering people together for ethnic-themed events



A frequent criticism of diversity initiatives is that such initiatives are ineffectual or eventually short-circuit because they do not provide people the tools needed to develop two essential interpersonal skill sets: (a) self-awareness about their own personal beliefs, values, and motives, and (b) interpersonal skills to alter daily behaviors.

## Cultural Competency Requires “Competency”

To become culturally competent, individuals are required to overcome fear and discomfort and become fluent in four areas:

**1. Knowledge** - Factual information that supplants stereotypes and generalizations about people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The more accurate information we have about others, the more likely it is we will develop appropriate opinions, feelings, and behaviors.

*ACCEPTANCE: A favorable reception; approval; favor. The act of assenting or believing; acceptance of a theory. The fact or state of being accepted or acceptable.*

### 3. Acceptance -

Acceptance is not just tolerating the behaviors and style of others.

Tolerance may be an element of acceptance, but respect is a major component.

Respect and tolerance allow others the same freedom of behavior and style that we desire for ourselves.

Respect sees value in having people contribute from the perspective of their background and culture.

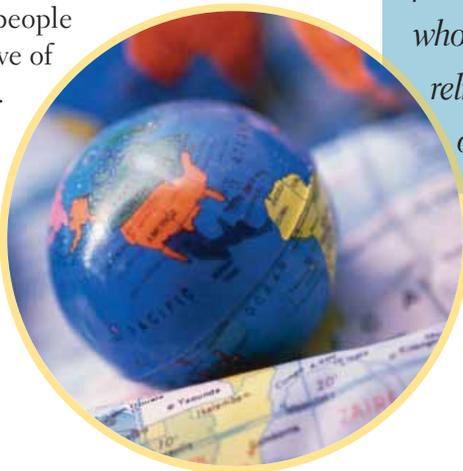
When our views of other people are not blemished or tarnished by negative cultural or racial characterizations, respect can create change through trust.

**2. Understanding** - The highest level of understanding is empathy, the ability to make connections with others on an emotional level and put ourselves in other people's shoes. Understanding can come from awareness and comprehension of how and

why others may see the same situation differently because their cultural viewpoint differs from one's own.

*RESPECT: Esteem for or a sense of the worth or excellence of a person, a personal quality or ability, or something considered as a manifestation of a personal quality or ability; to show regard or consideration for.*

*TOLERANCE: A fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own; freedom from bigotry.*



**4. Behavior** - Fundamentally, no matter how different each may be from the other, cultural competence is expressed through words and actions, one person to another.

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### Benefits of cultural competency

In many organizations, culture clashes lie at the heart of daily interpersonal conflicts. While illegal discriminatory behaviors may be waning, direct or unwitting stereotypical attitudes, prevailing behaviors, and norms may still persist. Cultural ignorance can hamper workforce productivity, stifle creativity and innovation, and breed high turnover.

As the American workforce and consumer markets grow more diverse, it will become increasingly important to move beyond diversity to cultural competency. Culturally competent organizations will be able to effectively create and provide services, successfully recruit and retain productive workers, and realize results both on the bottom line and in day-to-day human activity.

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*4 The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank in Washington, DC, dedicated the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. (About MPI (2009). Retrieved 7/13/09, from <http://www.migrationinformation.org/about.cfm>).*

*5 The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities a fresh look at how they are changing. It is a critical element in the Census Bureau's reengineered decennial census program. The ACS collects and produces population and housing information every year instead of every ten years. (About the ACS, (2009). Retrieved 7/13/09).*

*6 The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is the principal fact-finding agency for the Federal Government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. The BLS is an independent national statistical agency that collects, processes, analyzes, and disseminates essential statistical data to the American public, the U.S. Congress, other Federal agencies, State and local governments, business, and labor. The BLS also serves as a statistical resource to the Department of Labor. (Mission Statement, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001). Retrieved 7/13/09, from <http://www.bls.gov/bls/blsmisn.htm>).*

*7 "Foreign born" and "immigrants" are used terms used interchangeably by the Census Bureau and refer to persons with no US citizenship at birth. This population includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, refugees and asylees, persons on certain temporary visas, and the unauthorized.*

*8 Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics in 2008 (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbm.nr0.htm> 7/13/09.*



## How do Cultural Competency, Cultural Awareness & Cultural Sensitivity Differ?

When we describe someone as “capable”<sup>9</sup> or “competent”<sup>10</sup> we are indicating that the person possesses the adequate or necessary ability or qualities to function or act in a particular way.

Therefore if an individual is described as “culturally competent” or as having cross-cultural capabilities, we are saying **the individual is able to function appropriately** in settings in which the culture or individuals s/he is working with are unlike his/her own.

But what does this actually mean? What skills, abilities or attitudes does a person have if he has “cross-cultural capabilities?” Many terms are used to capture the idea of effective cross-cultural capabilities/cultural competence. Cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity all convey the idea of improving cross-cultural capacity, but these terms all mean something slightly different.

Cultural competency emphasizes the idea of effectively operating in different cultural contexts. Knowledge, sensitivity, and awareness do not include this concept.

9 Capable. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved July 9, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capable>

10 Competent. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved July 9, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/competent>

11 Diane L. Adams (Ed.). (1995). *Health issues for women of color: A cultural diversity perspective*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

12 Ibid

13 National Maternal and Child Health Center on Cultural Competency, 1997.



### Cultural Knowledge:

*Familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems, and behaviors of the members of another ethnic group.*<sup>11</sup>

### Cultural Awareness:

*Developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values.*

*Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge.*<sup>12</sup>

### Cultural Sensitivity:

*Knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences.*<sup>13</sup>



This newsletter is provided by:

Access/Equity/Diversity Office

Southeast Community College

301 S. 68th St. Place

Lincoln, NE 68510

# SCC **Southeast Community College**

**For more information contact:**

Jose J. Soto  
Vice President for Access/Equity/Diversity  
jsoto@southeast.edu, (402)323-3412

Susan M. Dunn  
ADA/Access/Equity Specialist  
sdunn@southeast.edu, (402)323-3413

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## Beatrice Campus

4771 West Scott Road  
Beatrice, NE 68310-7042  
Phone: 402-228-3468  
1-800-233-5027  
FAX: 402-228-2218

## Lincoln Campus

8800 O Street  
Lincoln, NE 68520-1299  
Phone: 402-471-3333  
1-800-642-4075  
Deaf/TDD: 402-437-2702  
FAX: 402-437-2404

## Milford Campus

600 State Street  
Milford, NE 68405-8498  
Phone: 402-761-2131  
1-800-933-7223  
FAX: 402-761-2324

## Energy Square Location (ESQ)

1111 O Street, Suite 112  
Lincoln, NE 68508-3614  
Phone: 402-323-3441  
FAX: 402-323-3453

## Entrepreneurship Center

285 S. 68th Street Place  
Lincoln, NE 68510-2449  
Phone: 402-323-3383  
FAX: 402-323-3399

## Continuing Education Center

301 S. 68th Street Place  
Lincoln, NE 68510-2449  
Phone: 402-437-2700  
1-800-828-0072  
FAX: 402-437-2703

## SCC-Area Office

301 S. 68th St. Place, 5th floor  
Lincoln, NE 68510-2449  
Phone: 402-323-3400  
FAX: 402-323-3420

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