Cultural Awareness, Sensitivity, & Competence

In our workplaces, in our world, we are a diverse people. Cultural competence is increasingly important as our means of communication and collaboration in working environments evolve. Learning how to respect, communicate and collaborate with an increasingly diverse work culture is crucial to optimizing a company’s efficiency and productivity.

Benefits of a cultural competent workplace can include:

* **Increased understanding and appreciation for different perspectives**
* **Broader and more diversified ideas**
* **Improved coworker and customer relations**
* **Improved listening skills**
* **Increased empathy and adaptability**

In the industry of human resources, the concept of cultural competence is agreed upon to be the ability to effectively communicate and interact with people across cultures through positive behaviors, attitudes and policies. The word “culture” has evolved to include the beliefs, values and thoughts of individuals, in addition to the of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group and competence implies the ability to function effectively.  The word “culture” includes a person’s race, ethnicity, religion, medical condition, genetic information or manifestation, country of origin, veteran status, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political affiliation.

Providing employees with orientation and training to help them better understand cultural differences is critical for effective work and team performance in a cross-cultural work environment. Training classes help your employees better understand the emotional needs in other cultures. Training should cover topics in communication styles in different cultures, nonverbal behaviors in different cultures, gender roles and age roles, negotiation skills, business etiquette and marketing skills specific to each culture. Whether touching someone’s arm while talking, shaking hands too long, making eye contact, or use of first names without invitation can all be cultural differences that can lead to unintentional and misinterpreted offenses.

Different cultures have many different ways of communicating, especially with regard to context and directness. For example, in the United States, people tend to be more direct and say what they mean. In many other cultures, people are less direct, which can be confusing or misleading to employees who are accustomed to a direct approach. To avoid miscommunication, you can use short sentences and avoid colloquialism. Following up verbal communication with an email can also help to prevent mistakes and misunderstandings.

Employees generally know the importance of good manners, but in some countries, good manners are crucial. For example, saying “please” and “thank you” are considered essential in some countries.  It’s also important to keep your level of formality in mind. In the United States, people tend to be more casual, both in behavior as well as dress. In other cultures, formality is valued and is a demonstration of respect.

Cultural competence is achieved through cultural awareness. Cultural awareness is achieved through education, training, and experience. The more understanding and awareness an employee develops, the more sensitive that employee will be to coworkers and customers of different cultures. Cultural sensitivity refers to the willingness and ability to understand people with different backgrounds.

1. **Cultural knowledge *-*** means that you know facts and have had first had experiences about the cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of another cultural group.
2. **Cultural awareness *–*** to be aware is to recognize and utilize the knowledge you have obtained about different cultures.
3. **Cultural sensitivity *-*** is knowing that differences exist between cultures, but not assigning values to the differences. Then being willing to exercise such behaviors, words, and actions that acknowledge and respect those differences.
4. **Cultural competence *-*** A culturally competent organization has the capacity to provide services, products, and support to customers while also demonstrating knowledge and awareness of that customer’s culture, and being sensitive to that customer’s culture by speaking, behaving, and taking actions that show respect and consideration for that customer’s culture.