A couple of decades ago, when the world was a simpler place, people who worked internationally simply moved from one culture or country to the next.

Today, all this has changed. Despite working with people from both multiple country and professional cultures, many people who work in the international arena may barely leave home. The ability to do this successfully from any starting point depends on people’s level of cultural intelligence.

Culture itself is a shared set of assumptions, values and norms for a group of people that helps them prioritize what they are going to do and how they are going to get things done. It makes it easier to get things done within one’s own culture than when working across cultures. Culture also helps to define the group.

Cultural intelligence, on the other hand, is key to the success of today’s cross culture, cross border, cross organization worker. Cultural intelligence – or the ability to create an impact across different cultures - is a much more complex thing than just working across boundaries. In real terms, it is the ability to understand the relationship between cultural issues, on the one hand, and business issues on the other. The tricky part is understanding both, and putting them back together without losing who you are in the process.

Cultural intelligence - does one learn it or does it come naturally?
The answer is a bit of both.

Cultural intelligence consists of specific knowledge about different cultures, as well as general knowledge about how cultures work. It’s best to create a map of the cultures you are working with – how are they different from and similar to each other? Of course you need to understand your own culture too – you need to have the “I am here” position in order to know how to bridge to the others.

Cultural intelligence also requires skills - interpersonal skills, negotiation, listening, and cross-cultural skills. The most important characteristic, however, is cultural mindfulness – or openness to new experiences and ideas and the ability to keep learning.

Mindfulness is really about paying attention. It is what helps a person recognize and understand the differences between cultures. Recent research has shown that if teams or individuals working in cross cultural situations can be persuaded to pay more attention,
performance goes up. It really is as simple as it sounds, it’s just that we don’t usually take the time or effort to pay attention.

The reason that many mergers and acquisitions have a difficult time integrating is usually because they have different norms, different values, and different ways of doing things. This is a classic example of where cultural knowledge, skills, intelligence and mindfulness are very important. Surprisingly, mindfulness in virtual teams tends to be higher than it is in their face-to-face counterparts, although face-to-face contact is an undeniable asset when building a relationship. The virtual context helps people focus and pay attention to the right issues.

**When in Rome do as the Romans...or not?**

Although attempting to adapt in Rome and do as the proverbial Romans did is an automatic response, it is not necessarily the best one. Pretending to be Roman can not only get in the way of one’s performance, but may be perceived by other people as insincere or, even worse, manipulative. What is required is enough of a behavior change to show respect, without losing one’s sense of self and effectiveness.

While nobody expects everyone on a twenty-person multicultural team to speak everybody else’s languages, the key here is respect in terms of keeping language simple without being offensively overly so.

**Cultural and emotional intelligence – inseparable or unrelated?**

Inseparable!

Cultural intelligence is emotional intelligence across contexts, which makes emotional intelligence a prerequisite for cultural intelligence. And while some people can be very emotionally intelligent in their own culture, a shift across boundaries to some place where the norms and assumptions are different can prove to be a step too far. By the same token, higher-emotional-intelligence people are more likely to pick up cultural differences and develop cultural intelligence too.

“Culture is to people as water is to fish” – and it’s all good until the fish is out of water! The best way to get help in understanding a culture is to ask someone from that culture who has been out. “If they haven’t been out, they won’t know what makes it different for an outsider!”
Whose responsibility to adapt?

This is the classic dilemma – how much should I adapt, how much should I expect the others to adapt? The simple answer is this: adapting is the responsibility of anybody who cares about performance. If one person adapts, performance improves a bit. If everybody adapts, performance skyrockets.

Martha Maznevski is Professor of Organizational Behaviour and International Management at IMD. She teaches on the Strategic Leadership for Women and Orchestrating Winning Performance programs.
HOW CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE CAN IMPROVE PERFORMANCE | Adapting abroad while being yourself

RELATED PROGRAMS

ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE - http://www.imd.ch/owpv
The 6-day global business program
Program Director Bettina Buechel
- A unique energizer: boost your performance, broaden your perspectives and expand your global network
- Design the program that suits you

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN - http://www.imd.ch/sl
Empowering Women Leaders
Program Director Bettina Buechel
- Equip senior-level female managers, directors and confirmed high potentials for greater success in current assignments and prepare them to take on even more senior roles with confidence
- Improve performance and lead more effectively
- Build a network of colleagues to serve as mentors and role models