

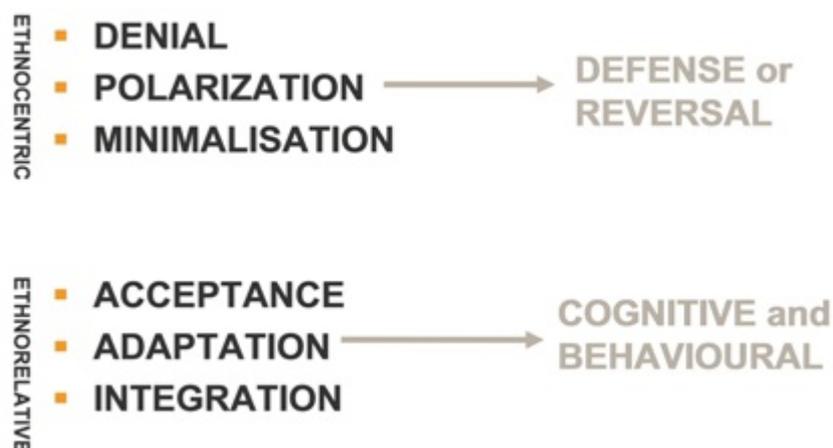
Preparing for an International Assignment Etiquette, Skillset or Mindset?

'Experience is not a function of simply being in the vicinity of events when they occur.'
- George Kelly

'The true voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.'
- Marcel Proust

You have selected a member of your team to take on an international assignment which will require them to live and work overseas for a significant period of time. How do you plan to prepare them for this – possibly their first – international assignment? You could sign them up for an e-learning program or buy them a book which gives them tips on whether to 'kiss, bow or shake hands'. You could send them on a seminar where they learn cross-cultural communication and conflict management skills. You could, of course, just send them off with the justification that most people learn best from experience anyway. Whatever you choose to do; six to twelve months later they are likely either to be enjoying a huge level of success - both at a personal and professional level - or ready to come home. Why is that?

The single most significant success factor for any individual that begins living and working across cultures is not knowledge, skills or even 'experience'. It is the way they have learned to process that experience, the way they view the world around them or put simply; their mindset. In this article, we will explore the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity® (DMIS) from Dr. Milton Bennett which has been recently adapted through further research conducted by Dr. Mitchell Hammer. What is the process that individuals tend to go through as they develop their intercultural competence? What are the significant and measurable shifts in their mindset?



Milton Bennett and Mitch Hammer

Individuals that are currently experiencing **Denial** towards cultural differences will generally be disinterested in and unable to perceive cultural differences or will tend to avoid cultural differences. I remember my first experiences of living and working in France as a young adult. I remember discovering incredible and reasonably priced red wine, sophisticated and attractive French women, the etiquette of enjoying delicious cheeses after the main course but before desert and – quite frankly – not a lot else. If you had asked me about my experience of French culture, I might of mumbled something about it being ‘a bit like the UK but with more style and better food’. Looking back it’s had to say why I failed to have a more French experience of France at that time. Maybe I lacked the self-awareness or the confidence to engage with my environment. A more realistic explanation is that I simply surrounded myself with other expatriates and outsiders and failed to break into local social circles.

Individuals whose experience of cultural differences is best described by the term **Polarization** may tend to polarize (“us” and “them”). This may take the form of **Defense** where negative experiences of cultural differences can lead the individual to perceive their own culture to be superior to that of another cultural group. Alternatively this may be experienced as **Reversal**. Here the polarisation (“us” and “them”) is reversed and the individual starts to reject his or her own cultural group. I can still remember vividly the huge frustrations I experienced with ‘German bureaucracy’ after moving on to that country a little later. It seemed as if the Germans were incredibly inflexible, obsessed with meaningless detail and extremely unhelpful. They also – in my opinion - appeared to lack any sense of humour beyond a love of slapstick. Today, I know that Germans are systematic and efficient rather than inflexible, incredibly loyal and supportive once a deeper relationship has developed and most definitely have a sense of humour; just not in formal business meetings.

Individuals that are currently experiencing **Minimalization** of cultural differences will generally have a positive attitude to people from other cultures, will tend to assume that others are “like us” and will often focus on commonality for fear of “stereotyping”. They may also have a strong belief in universal values and standards and normally a limited understanding of own culture. After my experiences in France, I made a real effort to build my local network in Germany. I learned the language, met local people (and deliberately stayed away from the expatriate community) and luckily was introduced by a local to a wide range of wonderful German people. Very soon it became incredibly difficult to maintain a negative opinion about Germans in general when I knew so many wonderful Germans in person. Minimizing cultural differences was the easiest way to resolve this dilemma – ‘I must be mistaken about Germans being bureaucratic, inflexible and obsessed with detail; really they are just like us.’

The problem was that when I quizzed my German friends about my challenging experiences and often when they observed me interactions with local people, these wonderful people would generally inform me that, it was in fact, I who was acting strangely, being unreasonable or even rude. Something was still not quite right.....

What comes next represents a big shift – from what Bennett termed an **ethnocentric** approach to an **enthnorelative** approach. Put simply, ethnocentric approaches (including Minimalization) are based on the assumption that there is only one way of experiencing a situation – and that’s my way. Once we make the shift to a more enthnorelative approach, we begin to accept that there could be multiple –and equally valid – realities, even if we are not yet sure what they actually are.

Individuals that are experiencing **Acceptance** of cultural differences are able to recognize their own cultural values and standards and how they shape their behaviour. They have found an appropriate balance between valuing differences and seeking commonality with people that have a different cultural background. They can appreciate that acceptance need not mean agreement. One of the most exciting things I found about living and working overseas was how much I learned what it means to be British. We really do expect each other to have an opinion about anything and everything; even if we know nothing about it and yes, if a complete stranger steps on my foot in an elevator my first instinct is to apologize to them.

Adaption means that the individual is now able to view a situation from multiple perspectives. They may also be able to adapt their behaviour depending on the cultural context – either consciously or unconsciously – and act as a bridge between people who have different cultural backgrounds. With time and practice; I learned to speak openly and directly with friends, colleagues and complete strangers, I can provide a lot of detail when it is requested without getting irritable, I respect traffic signals and have learned to be incredibly disciplined and organized at work. I can even embrace other men without the slightest trace of discomfort or embarrassment.

Integration is the final step of the journey as the individual begins to incorporate aspects of the host culture at the deepest level. Personal values and beliefs may change to reflect those of the host culture and the individual is able to switch effortlessly from one thought processes or style of behaviour to another. After thirteen years of living and working in Germany, British friends, colleagues and clients have often observed that I am somehow different and don’t quite fit in. I have even been accused of ‘going native’ - but more in jest than as a serious criticism.

My experience of integration has been extremely positive. I feel that my time in Germany has taught me a lot of wonderful traits and helped me mature as a person. I have taken a lot of values and behaviours that I admire so much from that culture. I remain, however, strongly anchored in the UK in terms of my sense of identity.

Third culture kids or TCKs are identified by a childhood spent largely in a culture other than that of their parents. While this lifestyle can bring benefits like learning foreign languages and experiencing different ways of life, they can struggle with their sense of identity belonging in the world. Third culture kids often suffer a reverse culture shock upon their return to their home country and find it difficult to answer the question, ‘Where are you from?’ This is a negative experience of integration.



The Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI) was developed by Mitchell Hammer and Milton Bennett as way of capturing the individual's experience of cultural differences. It measures a person's current intercultural development by accurately placing them in one of the first five of the six major stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The instrument also captures information regarding the individual's experience of integration (the sixth stage of the DMIS) in terms of the **Cultural Disengagement** which can occur when an individual perceives themselves as an outsider and is unable to identify with any cultural group.

The IDI has been successfully used since 1998 in corporate and academic settings. It is well-validated and demonstrates high-levels of reliability. The instrument is easy to complete and provides a graphic profile of an individual's or group's stage of development in dealing effectively with members of another culture. Its main applications are in pre-departure training for expatriates, intercultural teams and for organizational needs assessments. It is also very powerful as part of an ongoing process of personal development within the context of a global leadership or executive coaching development program at any level of an organization.

I have now been living here in Australia since 2006 and in that short period of time I feel I have learned a lot about Australian beliefs, values and behaviours. I do still struggle from time to time to adapt my thinking and my behaviour to the local cultural context. And yes, you might catch me sometimes scratching my head and muttering about 'those Aussies...' If so, please forgive me as I am always seeking to understand the Australian perspective and act – where appropriate – accordingly.

In the meantime, I am raising three third culture kids TKDs with a partner who is herself an adult third culture kid ATKD and sometimes wonder how what the future will bring for our family. The only advice I can give to myself and my children is the same that I would share with my clients. Remain curious about and appreciate other people's values and beliefs, constantly seek to understand your own values and how they are shaping your behaviour – and challenge those values when you need to – and engage in dialog and find common ground with those people who are different from you. Intercultural competence means achieving the right balance between seeking commonality and valuing differences. And that's the bottom line.

References

Intercultural Development Inventory IDI®, www.idiinventory.com

Third Culture Kids, David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, Intercultural Press, 2001

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