

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2016 Edition

Feature

Intercultural Sensitivity: What This Means for Workplace Culture

Moving towards ethnorelativity

As we have welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees in the past months, I thought about the imbalance between immigrant training and workplace preparation. Skills development, learning about Canadian culture and certification are all important aspects of resettlement success. We seem to put a lot of energy and attention to training new Canadians and upgrading their credentials, relative to the energy and attention we give to the environments these new members of the workforce will be entering.

Every organization has a culture and we screen potential applicants, consciously and unconsciously, based on their perceived "fit" into this culture. In John McLaughlin's article "What is Organizational Culture" (available at www.Study.com), it is defined as "a system of shared assumptions, values and beliefs which governs how people behave in organizations. These shared values have a strong influence on the people in the organization and dictate how they dress, act and perform their jobs. Every organization develops and maintains a unique culture which provides guidelines and boundaries for the behaviour of the members of the organization."

Part of that organizational culture will be influenced by Canadian and provincial or territorial culture. Unlike new hires who are Canadian, new immigrants have a steeper learning curve as they navigate the Canadian culture along with the culture of the organization they are working in.

When we place the onus of adjusting on the new immigrant who arrives in our workplace, we miss many opportunities. There is much we can do to create an environment that is inclusive and welcoming of diversity, and an environment that in addition to valuing their skills, also appreciates and considers the diversity of ideas, perspectives and thought they bring.

Milton Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (published through the Intercultural Development Research Institute in 2011) is an interesting tool that can assist us in this goal of truly welcoming immigrants into our organizations and creating an inclusive environment. It is a continuum that can provide people and organizations with an opportunity to embrace difference and diversity while also recognizing the culture they are steeped in. Both are valuable in creating workplaces where people can thrive.

Bennett's Model is a continuum of 6 stages: the three on the left (denial, defense and minimization) suggest various degrees of ethnocentricity or avoiding difference; the three on the right (acceptance, adaptation and integration) suggest degrees of ethnorelativity or seeking difference. As with any continuum, the idea is that personal and organizational evolution occurs from left to right. It goes from ethnocentrism (where we measure and judge others by our own ways, discounting their validity or even refusing to see diversity) to ethnorelativity (where we begin to see cultural complexity and can eventually move between cultural perspectives).

Organizations can use this model as a tool to determine how open they are to difference, and therefore how to approach the creation of a more inclusive and welcoming environment — one that not only sees difference, but values and incorporates it into policy and practice.

Understanding where we are at is a crucial starting point for organizational change. When we consider unconscious bias, I would suggest that it is possible to be in the Denial stage without realizing it. Often we do things as they have always been done, assume it's the only way and require everyone to fall in line in order to participate. At the opposite end of the continuum, Integration has us recognizing and internalizing different cultures and cultural perspectives.



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Clearly a workplace that is committed to welcoming new immigrants would experience most success by being in the Ethnorelative side of the continuum, particularly the Integration stage. But this stage in and of itself does not take us far enough. It shows us where we are, but we need to apply the knowledge and use it to create an inclusive organization that not only values diversity, but acknowledges different needs, thoughts, ideas and perspectives. In order to move deeper, we need to engage with these varied cultural perspectives and incorporate the awareness of ethnorelativity into policy and even more importantly into practice.

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