



Are You Culture Clever?

Katarzyna Richter,
Cross Cultural
Psychologist discusses
the importance of
cultural intelligence.

“To be effective in another culture people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of the other culture.” - Bhawuk & Brislin (1992)

Having lived in the GCC region for over a decade, cross cultural issues

have always sustained my interest. This place is cosmopolitan by nature which makes it so important for us to sensitise ourselves to the various cultures both local and expatriate. Bahrain has been culturally diverse for at least 400 years, the local inhabitants come from many different countries and cultures including Afro – Arabs, Persians, Banyan (Indians who traded with Bahrain and settled before the age of oil), Bahraini Jews, Najdis and tribal communities. In Bahrain you may encounter various styles of greeting depending on a wide range of factors, including the background of the person, their exposure and mindset. In my everyday life in the GCC region I have observed various forms of greeting like a kiss on a cheek (usually between the same gender), touching noses (usually between men), a prolonged handshake and placing a hand on the heart along with a slight bow.

Cross cultural issues are not just relevant in our social circles but also at our work place. Some employers assess cultural intelligence and the ability to adapt to a foreign culture during job interviews for the positions that require relocation. A few competencies that these employers will look for in prospective candidates are respect for differences, open-mindedness, self control, resilience, ability to communicate with virtually anyone, high adaptability and empathy.

Ambiguity tolerance is another relevant topic related to cross cultural issues. When we move to a new place, certain amount



of pressure is inevitable. Imagine you have to settle yourself and your family into a new place which is stressful. On arriving at your new home the dreamy image of a sunny, tax free and multicultural paradise slowly vanishes; you may have problems with communication due to the different accents and mindsets. You may find it difficult to

accept the different personalities that you meet, perhaps because they don't behave in the way you expect them to. For instance, in some cultures people don't greet somebody who has a 'higher status' unless he or she speak to you first.

Cultural differences in basic things such as forms of greeting, eye contact and hand gestures can cause not only discomfort but can also lead to offensive faux pas. For instance, in Mediterranean countries it is customary to greet people with a kiss on both cheeks and in European countries men and women shake hands when they greet each other; this is not the case in the Middle East where a handshake between men and women may not be very common.

The best way to learn about another culture is to speak and interact with people of that culture. In order to build better understanding try getting to know people from various backgrounds, even in your own country. Social media can be helpful, websites like

quora.com are great source of information. Cultural awareness training programs are considered an investment as they provide knowledge on cultural differences, communication, etiquette which often makes the transition easier and helps to avoid painful mistakes and mitigate the culture shock ■

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