Cross Cultural Proficiency and Communication Module

Introduction
This module was designed to be used by a team, not only to understand the basics of cross cultural proficiency and communication, but also to help you explore where you are in the journey toward cultural proficiency and to give you tools to help you along the way. Activities are built into the module to give you the opportunity for group discussion and personal development. If you are working alone on this module, you may find it helpful to talk over some of the discussion questions with someone else.

What is culture?
Many people would define culture as music, literature, visual art, dance, architecture, and language. The deeper meaning of culture is what we do, think and feel.
Culture is taught, learned and shared. It enables its members to function with one another without having to think about what every little word or action means.
In cross-cultural situations, culture can both help us and hinder us as we try to understand each other and work effectively together.

YOUR TURN – The Name Game
Do this activity with a partner. Choose someone on your team that you don’t know very well. Tell them your full name and then take a minute or two to tell them something interesting about your name. Who named you? Why did they choose this name? Does your name have a special meaning? Are you happy with your name? Has it ever created a problem for you? Now switch places and let your partner have a turn. When you are both finished, reflect on how this activity changed the way you think about the other person.

YOUR TURN – Defining YOU
Every person has a cultural identity. Part of this cultural identity is your national identity – whether you are Khmer or Colombian or Canadian, and what this means for the way you think and feel and act. But you also belong to other cultural groups that help to identify you. For example, if you are a student or teacher, you belong to an academic culture. If you are a farmer, you belong to a farming culture. In this activity you will use markers/pen and paper to show the cultural groups you belong to. Be creative! You can use pictures and/or words, draw a family crest, a Venn diagram (see templates below), or any other method. You can also show how important each component is in defining your identity by making them larger or smaller. When you are finished, show what you have created to your team and explain it. Listen carefully to others when it is their turn. What did you learn about yourself in this process? Did anything surprise you about what others said?
Two templates for family crests on the left; two templates for Venn diagrams on the right

The Iceberg Model of Culture
Culture has been compared to an iceberg. Some parts of culture are visible on the surface, but a great deal of it is hidden below the surface.

YOUR TURN – Culture Talk
Divide up your team into smaller groups that share a culture. For example, group members could all come from the same region, or could share a love for music or sport. Using the iceberg model of culture as your guide, discuss the different characteristics of your shared culture. What features of your culture are easily visible to other people? What characteristics are not so obvious at first glance? Use the words on the iceberg diagram to help you. Now discuss any stereotypes that other people may have about this culture. Where do these stereotypes come from? Are they partially true? Fair?

Different Cultures, Different Ways
The iceberg model of culture helps us to understand our own culture better, but it also helps us to understand other cultures too. What we see on the surface of another culture is only part of the picture. For example, when you enter a new culture, you might enjoy eating the food, learning a few phrases in the language or visiting a cultural event, but you may not really understand how the people think or what they truly value in life. Understanding these deeper issues takes much more time and a more open mind and heart.

YOUR TURN – Remember When
Think about a time when you met someone of a different culture. What did they do that was different from you? Why do you think you noticed these differences? How did you feel about these differences? Did they surprise you? Intrigue you? Make you want to laugh? Share your stories with your team.
Change is Difficult!
It is very easy to think that our culture is the best and that other cultures just aren't as good. But this way of thinking makes it very difficult to get along with people of other cultures and to work together effectively. Learning to value other cultures and practice effective cross-cultural communication involves change. We must change the way we think and the way we behave.

When people are asked to make a change in the way they think or act, they often resist this change. People might resist change because:
- they feel awkward or uncomfortable about the change or might not see the point of it
- they feel comfortable with the old way of doing things and think about all the things they might lose if they have to change
- they feel alone, even if other people are going through the same change
- they can only handle so much, and change is happening too fast
- they are at different levels of readiness -- some people can change faster than others
- they are worried that they won't have enough support or resources to make the change

YOUR TURN - Easy or Hard?
Think about a time when you were asked to make a change in the way you thought or acted. How did you react? Was it easy or hard to make this change? Look at the bulleted list above again. Did you resist the change for any of these reasons? What could have made it easier for you to make this change?

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum
It's not easy to change the way we think and act, but this is what we need to do if we want to truly respect and honour other people's cultures and enjoy good communication with them. Some experts have identified six different stages in how people respond to cultures that are different from their own. These six stages can be strung together in a "cultural proficiency continuum" showing negative stages toward the left, and increasingly positive stages towards the right, as shown below.
**Cultural Destructiveness**: Using your power to destroy another culture. *Example*: genocide, exclusion laws

**Cultural Incapacity**: Believing your culture is superior and behaving in ways that disempower another’s culture. *Example*: Having low expectations for a certain group; giving that group few resources

**Cultural Blindness**: Acting as if cultural differences do not matter or as if there are not differences among/between cultures. *Example*: Beliefs/actions that assume the world is fair and achievement is based on merit

**Cultural Pre-Competence**: Recognizing the limitations of one’s skills or an organization's practices when interacting with other cultural groups. *Example*: Delegating "cultural sensitivity" and diversity work to others, offering "quick-fix" diversity programs

**Cultural Competence**: Interacting with others using the five essential elements of cultural proficiency (see below) as the standard for behavior and practice. *Example*: Advocacy for others, ongoing education of self and others

**Cultural Proficiency**: Esteeming diverse cultures; interacting effectively in a variety of cultural groups. *Example*: Interdependence, mutual assistance, creation of alliances

Five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency

Experts have found that organizations and groups that are culturally proficient have the following five characteristics:

- They value diversity
- They practice cultural self-assessment
- They are aware of the "dynamics" of when cultures interact
- They make cultural knowledge part of the way they operate
- They adapt their services to reflect a good understanding of the diversity within their own culture and between cultures

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**YOUR TURN – Assess Yourself**

Examine the cultural proficiency continuum, definitions and examples above again. Where do you fit along the continuum? But be honest about it... most of us like to think that we’re farther along that we really are! What are some of the personal steps you could take to move further to the right along the continuum? Now that you are getting to know your team better, you may be comfortable talking at a more personal level and sharing your insights on your own personal development toward cultural proficiency.

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**Bridging the Gap between Cultures**

Effective interpersonal communication bridges the gap between people and helps them get to know each other more deeply. Effective cross-cultural communication bridges the gap between people of different cultures, and helps them get to know each other better and appreciate their differences.
It's a good idea to have some basic ground rules for any kind of communication. These include:

- ensuring equality and respect
- creating a safe and welcoming environment
- keeping an open mind
- speaking constructively
- allowing everyone an opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and needs
- promoting active listening
- supporting creative problem solving

When it comes to cross-cultural communication, there are some other things you should keep in mind:

- Recognize that you have a certain world view, life experiences, opinions, and biases. Other people do too. Good communication between cultures recognizes and accepts these differences.
- All cultures have a set of courtesies that smooth relationships. Learn the expected courtesies of the other culture and practise them strictly until you get to know people better and they give you permission to relax some of the courtesy rules.
- Language often creates a barrier that you have to work around. Even if you speak a common language (often English or French), you may speak it differently and must allow for different accents, words, meanings, and idioms. Speak slowly and clearly, in short sentences. If you need to rely on the services of an interpreter, find out how to do this respectfully and comfortably in the other culture.
- Don't assume that you understand each other. Active listening will ensure that you can repeat back to the other person what you understood them to say, and then they can correct any misunderstandings. Both you and the person you are speaking with should use this technique.
- Humour is handled differently in different cultures. What is considered funny in one culture may be offensive in another culture. Avoid humour completely in formal situations, such as a business meetings and official gatherings. When you get to know people, take your cue from them. Remain open and comfortable about being teased when you make "cultural mistakes."
- Recognize that facial expressions and body language, including gestures, can be very meaningful in communication. Non-verbal communication can sometimes deliver a different message entirely from the one being said in words.
- If someone from another culture startles you by their words or actions, be understanding and forgiving. It takes time and practice to get it right, and a positive outlook, patience and a good sense of humour will go a long way to smoothing things out along the way.

**YOUR TURN – Frustration!**

As a team, share your personal experiences of a time when you were trying to communicate with someone and it just wasn't working. What were the barriers to good communication in that situation? What are some of the things you could have done to improve communication?
A Final Word
When you are the one crossing into another culture, it's up to you to make the most accommodations. Find out beforehand how to behave. Research acceptable dress, acceptable behaviour between the sexes and generations, the proper manners for certain contexts (like eating in a restaurant or visiting a person's home). And remember... good communication builds lasting relationships between people and cultures. It's worth the effort!

Sources

Iceberg graphic: Cross Culture [http://www.cross-culture.de/intercultural_coaching.htm]

Cultural Proficiency Continuum graphic: Cecil County Public Schools, Cultural Proficiency Professional Development [http://www.ccps.org/socialstudies/ETMA/pdf/Cultural%20Proficiency%20Continuum.ppt#256,1,Cultural Proficiency Continuum]