

Introduction to Cultural Nuances

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In this track, we'll cover

- Definitions of cultural nuance,
- Awareness of difference and diversity, and
- Navigating interpersonal differences.

Let's begin by looking at what is meant by cultural nuances. They're the subtle variations in the way people behave and slight differences in customs or habits. Families, colleagues, communities, and neighbourhoods may share particular behaviours. Some research speaks about cultural nuances in relation to entire countries and continents, although other individuals refute that such broad populations can be spoken about in such a generalised way. We'll look at this in more depth later on. Remember, too, that people might share habits and customs, but this does not mean they share the same beliefs and values. People's innate characters and personalities can be entirely separate from their traditions and behaviours.

Let's focus on tipping, an act that in some places is deemed to be almost mandatory and in others is considered insulting. In North America, it's customary to leave a tip of 15 to 20% of the total bill, and any less is considered to be rude. In Japan, a tip may be politely refused and looked on as entirely unnecessary.

Perhaps see if you can think of any other customs you're familiar with.

Next, let's look at the diversity of actions and body language.

We all form assumptions about other people's behaviours. We might be confident we clearly understand what people mean when they use particular gestures. In certain familiar spaces, with people we know well, we might have a grasp of the meanings behind somebody's body language and communication style. We may think there is universal agreement about particular cues or ways of acting. Something might be very clear or even feel instinctual to us. We might simply know how to navigate a particular workplace situation in a way that feels natural and comfortable. Our day-to-day exchanges may feel automatic, and we might be interacting with people on autopilot.

Erin Meyer, for [HBR](#), describes how “as companies internationalize, their employees become geographically dispersed and [can] lose their shared assumptions and norms.” The information you take for granted, or the social cues that come almost automatically to you, might need some further analysis. Etiquette and habits are not objective facts set in stone. Instead, they are customs and behaviours developed over time which are personal to particular individuals, communities, localities, or points in time.

Take the importance of place or community, for example, in a world where we can connect with people globally instantly. Reena Khullar Sharma, for [Forbes](#), examines how “the challenge of leadership and its role in every country continues to highlight the need for leaders to become more self-aware and commit to ongoing behavioral reflection that results in significant strides toward personal and professional development.” Again, we're talking about analysis and reflection. We must ask why we behave as we do, what shapes our understanding of ourselves and others, and how we need to adapt. As Erin Meyer highlights, “the closer the space we share and the more similar our cultural backgrounds, the stronger our reliance on unspoken cues. In these settings, we communicate in shorthand, often without realizing it—reading our counterparts' tone of voice, picking up on subtext.” Most importantly, we must examine the behaviours and interactions that we take for granted.

Crucially, people's identities are vast. We're influenced by so many different things, including where we grew up, where we have lived, and where we are based now. Perhaps these are one location or multiple different places. We are impacted by who we're surrounded by. Everything we do is informed by what we have perceived or been taught. We may have absorbed information either consciously or unknowingly. Being shaped by lots of different things is true of us in the workplace, particularly in terms of the leadership styles and management approaches we've adopted.

Reena Khullar Sharma explains that “the solutions to an organization’s management problems are often dependent on the workplace culture, as well as the culture of the country in which the leader resides.” We are all situated in a certain geographical and cultural context. We may have certain experiences in familiar places that make us confident about our communication abilities, say, but those experiences are linked to our location and own worldview. This ease may not transfer to another situation. We equally might not be understood or well-received in every situation we are in. For example, Reena Khullar Sharma talks about how “recognizing the cultural norms of the country of interest will guide the business strategy and the leader to a successful expansion.” There is huge value in knowing what may be considered offensive or rude, or distasteful in a particular place. Similarly, knowing how best to express positive feelings such as gratitude and appreciation is also important.

Erin Meyer presents this case study:

Often headquarters wants to be inclusive but finds that employees’ exchanges are hampered by differences in social customs. One Thai manager in the financial firm explained, “In Thai culture, there is a strong emphasis on avoiding mistakes, and we are very group oriented in our decision making. If the Americans want to hear from us on a conference call, they need to send the agenda at least 24 hours in advance so that we can prepare what we’d like to say and get feedback from our peers.” Unfortunately, the Thai manager told me, his U.S. colleagues usually didn’t send the agenda until an hour before the call, so his team was unable to prepare.

This is an example of different practices being embedded in different contexts. Difficulties in communication are caused if one group imposes their own ways of working without consultation, even though no one is actively setting out to create issues. The Thai manager explained how the US participants often spoke very quickly, which made them challenging to understand. He “said that the Americans rarely invited comments from the Thais, expecting them to jump into the conversation as they themselves would. But that kind of intervention is not the norm in Thailand, where it is much less common to speak if not invited or questioned.” In this instance, the US employees read this behaviour as a lack of interest and their colleagues having an absence of having something to contribute, but this was not actually the case. This leads back to the value of scrutinising our own behaviours and interrogating how our actions and practices may impact others. Finding out where there may be gaps in communication or incorrect assumptions made is the starting point of being able to create an inclusive plan of action for future meetings and interactions.

When visiting an office outside of the country you're most familiar with, being aware of the political climate and recent social events is worthwhile, too. This is most valuable in order not to cause offence or unintentionally make an inappropriate comment. Being entirely oblivious about where you are or who you're talking to does not necessarily demonstrate a realistic attempt to connect with potential investors. On a practical level, it's also useful for both parties to know when the other might not be available for work or could be responding to circumstances outside of their role. Consider public holidays, days of remembrance, independence days, religious holidays, and days of commemoration. It might be important to know if there are any political conflicts or recent events of significance. What's the time zone? Is there an election coming up? Has there been a recent event that has impacted a particular community? Which groups might be particularly marginalised? How might the climate impact working conditions? How much do you know about the country's recent history and demographic makeup? Are you aware of the way people from your country might be viewed when you're around people who aren't from the same place as you?

Differences could be linked to location, but shared location does not necessarily indicate shared understanding. And place certainly isn't the only factor when it comes to cultural variations. As Csaba Toth, for [Forbes](#), highlights, "every single conversation is a cross-cultural dialogue, and every single team is multicultural, even if it is not international." If you think about every experience, exchange, interaction, and conversation you've had, someone else has had an equally broad array of encounters and exposures. What we know to be true, what we do automatically, and what we believe to be right or normal are subjective. And each person has had a range of potentially contrasting experiences. Being conscious of this is so important. As Kwame Christian, for [Forbes](#), examines, "just think about the range of interests, temperaments, and lives among your friends or in your workplace, and you will get an idea of the diversity that exists everywhere."

Csaba Toth similarly explains, "research shows that over 80% of cultural differences exist within countries, not between them, so we do not have to go abroad or interact with different-looking people to experience cultural differences." Be aware that cultural differences (or indeed similarities) are not purely geographical. Cultural nuances can exist within offices all based in one particular city or between next-door neighbours. An important takeaway from their article is that "international knowledge is not cultural intelligence." You might know a lot of facts or figures about a continent or a nation, but that is not the same as developing a deep understanding of the individuals you're working

with and what matters most to them. Be empathetic, listen carefully, be prepared to learn something new, and set your own preconceptions aside. And as we mentioned earlier, be aware of the risks of making generalisations and assumptions.

This week, take a moment to reflect on your own daily routine and conversations with colleagues. What might you do that is specific to you or your workplace? Maybe you initiate a handshake when the person at the desk next to you prefers a wave. Do you open the floor to questions at the end of a meeting or assume people will jump in with comments if they have a point to make? Is it customary to bring cakes into the office to mark a colleague's birthday? All of these actions are specific to a particular time, group, and context. In another office, things may be done very differently.

So we've seen how customs, behaviours, and habits might vary from workplace to workplace. We've heard how important it is to consider interpersonal differences. And a valuable takeaway is to analyse our own behaviours and to interrogate what we might have always taken for granted.

That's all for now. Have a productive day!