# Cultural Agility Outline

## What is Culture?

**Culture** is a word that refers to the social norms, ideas, arts, beliefs, and other characteristics shared by a group of people in a set time and place. Because these characteristics can be very different among groups of people, misunderstanding can quickly arise. And these misunderstandings can seriously hamper the efforts of a business to expand, grow, or operate in a new cultural landscape.

This is why cultural agility is so apropos. What is cultural agility? How do successful organizations and their staff employ it? Read this lesson to find out!

We define "cultural agility" as the attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to provide effective leadership in an ever-changing diverse community. We are interested in helping leaders (1) understand their own culture and how it shapes their experience, (2) understand and appreciate cultural difference with others, and (3) incorporate this knowledge into their interactions and decision making. We need leaders who can operate with broad perspective and leaders who operate in a way that benefits from all the diverse talent in our region. of leaders in our region to provide effective leadership in increasingly diverse communities.

Why is it important to understand other cultures? Geographic borders are increasingly irrelevant, but cultural differences remain very real--and they often get in the way of effective leadership.

When leaders operate with culturally limited perspectives, the result is missed opportunities, poor performance, frail relationships and weak teams. In contrast, leaders who are culturally agile are able to respond to and perform well in varied and unfamiliar cultural contexts. They successfully engage a diversity of perspectives, learn new processes and foster effective collaboration.

How can you boost your cultural agility? Training sessions, language lessons, books and personal coaches do help leaders acquire the knowledge they need to be able to behave in a culturally appropriate manner. But information is not always enough. To develop real cultural agility, you need to learn by doing.

Cultural agility emerges when you have experiences as an outsider and find ways to reflect on, learn from and make sense of those experiences. Many highly effective global organizations, such as Coca-Cola and Gillette International, have strategies to actively build cultural agility. These include systems of rotating expatriate assignments. But culture-crossing experiences can happen locally too, if you work or live with people from a range of backgrounds.

# What is our role in this agency?

**Switching your frame of reference** requires you to temporarily suspend your beliefs, listen and watch. Can you avoid premature judgments and recognize all the value in what is happening around you?

Often we aren't even aware of our cultural assumptions and how they influence our behavior and decisions. Years ago I was working with a leadership team in Mexico, frustrated with what I saw as a lack of vision and commitment. It turned out that I was missing the cultural context of the machinery of government in the region. With the government changing hands every six years and power bases changing, the business strategy was largely a matter of surviving for the next six years. A 10-year plan seemed elusive, irrelevant or close to impossible, and I didn't know why until I got beyond my own cultural frame of reference.

**Be curious.** To see and understand others' frames of reference, you need to seek them out. Genuine curiosity and openness go a long way toward bringing you cultural agility. Without curiosity, you can spend years on expat assignments or routinely traveling internationally and always come back largely unchanged.

Noncritical questioning shows your interest and is an effective way to elicit the perspectives of others. As you watch some operation, you might say, "I've not seen this before. Can you help me understand why we do it this way?" When evaluating options: "Help me see what you see. What is the most valuable thing about doing it this way? What makes this work for you?"

Again, hold your judgment. Take notes. Honor the response you get.

**Look for commonalities.** As you seek to notice and find value in difference, don't lose sight of what is shared. Seeing and appreciating similarities helps soften the burden of difference. Also, studies have shown that teams that identify and build on their commonalities early on can develop their collective cultural agility and be more effective than groups that initially focus only on differences.

**Reflect and learn.** In the rush of travel, constant deadlines and 'round-the-clock management, many of us miss opportunities to grow as leaders and improve our business outcomes. When you travel or work with a new group of people, be sure to process the experience. Take time to reflect on questions like: What seems familiar and common? What is confusing to me or different? What is interesting? What insight did I gain today into the work being done and the people involved? What could I ask about or focus on next that would deepen the team understanding and lead to new possibilities?

**Champion the ideas of others.** When you find value or expertise that has been unseen or ignored, spread the word. This may require checking your own ego or

encouraging others in the organization to rethink their cultural assumptions. One manager I knew couldn't get anyone to pay attention to a possible change in the manufacturing process that he saw as a game-changer. "It's a constant battle for credibility," he said. "Corporate doesn't expect innovation to come from us; they won't listen to us." Eventually a culturally agile executive at corporate "got it" and championed the change. As a result, the manager's process became standard across all countries. Eyes were opened within the organization, and a best practice was implemented system-wide.

*Laura Curnutt Santana is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership and co-author of the chapter "Developing Leaders with Cultural Intelligence" in* Extraordinary Leadership: Addressing the Gaps in Senior Executive Development *(Jossey-Bass/A Wiley Imprint, 2010)*


## Should all of our programming be the same?

Culturally agile professionals, however, know that cultural adaptability is only a piece of the challenge. They understand that there are times when strategic necessity dictates a single enterprisewide standard—not adapting to the local one. Safety, ethics, and quality are a few salient examples. They also understand that there are other circumstances when the best approach is to take the time to create a new approach, one that does not represent any one culture completely.

Who is our customer?

Has our current and potential customer base changed?

Why is it important for us to change?

What can we do to adjust to the change?

Why is it so hard to change?

What are some barriers to SP changing?

How can we overcome these barriers?

What is our personal responsibility?

Broaden you scope. Are you only reaching out to "underprivileged" groups, and highlighting those efforts as diversity outreach? What you are saying is we don't really acknowledge you as our customer base, more of a charity case.

Establish a baseline understanding of how people's many different experiences and cultures affect how they relate to the outdoors and outdoor recreation. Establishing this baseline will allow us to be more relevant to all.

Advocate for the preservation of cultural dance, storytelling, and legends that connect people with the outdoors.

We're all people of the earth; of course we're outdoors—just not always in the way the mainstream likes to define and count.

Change you images and programming.

How do we change others?

What can we expect?

What are our next steps? (Commitment)