

What is Cultural Agility?

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The graduate school where I received my MBA had a very international focus. Half of the students were American and half were foreign nationals from all over the world.

At our orientation we introduced ourselves to our future classmates. A Norwegian student who was new to the U.S. told us about an early brush with American culture. He had had a disagreement with his landlord, an Italian American. The more they argued, the louder the landlord got. Pretty soon, he was cursing at the student. Assuming that this was just how Americans negotiate, my Norwegian colleague, who was normally a very low-key guy, started screaming, waving his arms, and calling his landlord every foul name he could think of. And he could think of quite a few.

Not surprisingly, the student didn't win the argument. "I guess I was wrong about American culture, because my landlord kicked me out," he told us. "Does anyone need a roommate?"

It's a humorous story, but the same thing can happen to your business and the results aren't so funny.

The mistake the student made was believing that in order to do well in another culture, you have to mimic what you see and forget your own way of interacting with others.

In cross-cultural training this assumption comes from something called the cultural onion model, which says that a culture is made up of layer after layer of standard behavior, feelings, and values. But this model has two fatal flaws.

First, when you get to the center of an onion, there's nothing there. When my Norwegian classmate started swearing at his landlord, he wasn't being himself. He abandoned his internal navigation because he was attempting to "put on" a different culture.

That's why I prefer the metaphor of a cultural artichoke. There are still plenty of layers and some of them are thorny, but at its core there's a heart. At the core of our interactions there are people. Through the maze of shifting cultures we're really just looking to connect, listen, build relationships, and lead. And if you leave an artichoke on the stalk it will blossom into a beautiful flower.

The second flaw of the cultural onion model is that it's completely outdated. It assumes that cultures have rules. Learn the playbook and you can succeed.

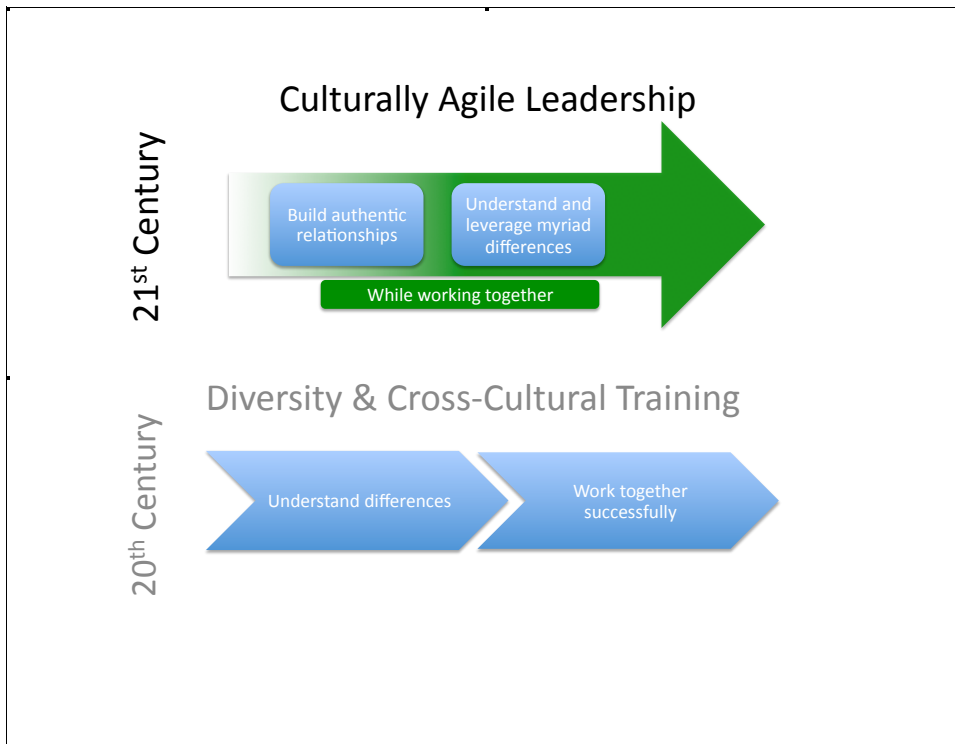
This worked well enough when the U.S. was primarily building business relationships with Germany and Japan. Those countries have fairly homogenous cultures. So if you followed the cultural playbook you could pretty much get it right.

Today our major business partners include China, Brazil, and India. These are huge countries with extraordinarily diverse populations. They are multiracial, multilingual, and have countless cultural dimensions.

In other words, they are as complicated as the United States. This country has been around for almost 250 years and we're still trying to figure ourselves out. We even have a form of internal cross-cultural training. We call it diversity training.

In a global business environment you may very well have to manage people in all of these countries at once.

There isn't a playbook big enough to give you complete knowledge of all the cultures you and your company interact with. And even if someone did write it, it would have to be updated constantly. With the growing ease of travel, the Internet and global entertainment, we're not cultural islands anymore. Everyone is influencing everyone else.



But this doesn't mean we're all moving towards a uniform vanilla or mocha. We may appear more similar at the surface level, but we still have very deep and personal cultural beliefs.

Having knowledge of other cultures remains important, but in contemporary global interactions knowledge alone won't cut it.

Now you have to have skill.

And that means having cultural agility.

Despite some of what you'll see around the Internet, this isn't just a new name for cross-cultural and diversity training. Cultural agility is the ability to communicate and build relationships by responding to cultural ambiguity and making adjustments rapidly and under control.

To help explain what I mean, I'll use a sports analogy. The basketball player Michael Jordan had great athletic agility. There are countless highlight videos that show him jumping up for a shot with the ball in one hand and then, midair, passing the ball to his other hand to make the shot from the other side of the basket. Because that's where the best shot was. Jordan was able to react to fast-changing situations and change direction when necessary without losing control.

Cultural agility is much the same. Only it's about people. Certainly there aren't many athletes who have the athletic agility as Michael Jordan. But agility is a skill set that can be learned and improved. Sports coaches assess the agility of their player and train them to improve it. When I work with leaders and teams the same applies. I assess the current level of cultural agility and train the skills for improvement.

I've worked with scores of leaders and organizations on five continents and here's what I've helped my clients achieve by improving their cultural agility:

- **Grow revenue by developing new customer bases**

We were able to help a retailer increase sales by over 35 percent by engaging just one new cultural market – and this wasn't even international, this was domestic. Before becoming culturally agile they didn't understand and so weren't at all attractive to this market.

- **Speedier integration of acquired companies.**

I was brought into an international acquisition project and the integration plan was for 18 months. By developing the cultural agility of both the team of the acquiring company and the team being acquired, things went much more smoothly than they would have otherwise. The revenue and cost milestones were reached five months earlier than originally projected.

- **Successful career transitions**

Different companies have different cultures. One executive was hired because of his previous leadership success, but his style didn't fit well with the culture of his new company. By adding cultural agility skill training to his on-board coaching, he was able to quickly become more relevant in his new position.

In summary, it's time to replace the onion with the artichoke. Cross-cultural and diversity training served us well for a while. But when I can walk down a corridor at

a company in Silicon Valley and hear four languages spoken, or teach a teleseminar with attendees in 18 different countries, I know the business world has changed.

We have to connect quickly, cut through the cultural complexities, and lead with heart.