

# Crossing

## THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

We as human beings come from a myriad of different cultures or identity groups that form the basis for how we see ourselves. Some examples are race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, country of origin, and work groups. Belonging to such groups contributes to the way we feel about ourselves and helps us to form a picture of whether or not we can become successful in life. If this is true, why then does belonging to some of these groups create barriers in developing relationships with people?

Diversity and inclusion, intercultural competence and global diversity are attempts to cross these lines of divide in order to create an inclusive atmosphere. As diversity and inclusion continue to expand as an industry, I believe there are three barriers that must be addressed - fear, ignorance and prejudice.

Underlying fear is resistance to change so we make comments like “my way is the right way” or “people just need to conform to my way of doing / seeing things.” We think that even if we were to consider changing we might say something wrong and we tend to avoid conflict, especially when it comes to working with people from different groups.

The problem with ignorance is that one may be caught in a position of not knowing what they don't know. When confronted with this possibility the tendency is to shut down and become critical of others.

Prejudice if examined can be overcome enough so that people could work together. I am not saying all the prejudices would go away, but it is possible to reduce them enough so an inclusive atmosphere could be created.

Here are five dimensions of inclusion, which if implemented could assist individuals from different identity groups to collaborate with one another.



### **Connection**

While participating in a one-day session on increasing intercultural competence, a university dean (European American) and a maintenance director (Latino, spoke English as a second language) were paired to work on a specific task. Although to all appearances the men had little in common, through the course of their conversa-



tion they learned they each had grandchildren. Now they had a connection, a foundation on which to begin building a relationship.

***Inquiry***

Now that a foundation had been built the two men could begin to ask each other questions which helped relieve tensions about how to relate to each other. For instance the dean might ask the maintenance director “do I call you Hispanic or Latino?” Be mindful that one person will prefer Hispanic while someone else from the same or similar culture group would prefer to be called Latino or something different. This process is not only relevant to cultures but has many other applications. People named “Robert” may prefer to be called “Bob” or “Rob” or “Bert.” None are wrong, but are personal preferences and all we need to do is comply with the individual request.

***Awareness***

Inquiry leads to awareness which helps everyone connect and lessen the fear of doing something wrong. The dean knows the preference of the director’s cultural identity so the conversation can proceed with more confidence.

***Alignment***

Not until a common ground has been established through the first three dimensions can the task or tasks that go beyond interpersonal relationship be addressed. In the case of the dean and maintenance director, they were now able to increase their ability to work together collaboratively to create an inclusive environment institutionally while still building their capacity to relate interpersonally with one another.

***Commonness***

One of the tenets of effective leaders is to create commonness especially if it doesn’t exist naturally. Being called to a one-day session on increasing intercultural competence is an example of how commonness was begun. Moving

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from a conversation about grandchildren can evolve into a dialog about what can be done for students, staff and faculty to make the university experience optimal. Developing an appreciation for differences can be experienced as expanding our view about human beings and build respect for the different cultural identity groups. Commonness should not be confused with sameness. Sameness implies that we must speak or act alike. Commonness garners an appreciation for differences while still promoting the fact that organizations can strive for common goals, objectives and outcomes that are agreed upon by all parties.

