IN-COUNTRY CULTURE STRATEGIES PART III:
STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

It took me a long time to feel competent in Italy. Certainly I mean my language skills, but I also mean almost a change of attitude—an acceptance that things really run differently here. My hard work and the difficulties I faced did pay off, and I learned to really enjoy the culture at a deeper level.
— Jacob Dick, Italy

What, you may be asking, is intercultural competence? It’s when you feel effective in the host culture and others see you as effective. The things that you did at home you are able to do well in the host country, too. For example, you are doing well academically, you have friends you can count on, you work part time, and you have the same (or more!) confidence.

This section focuses on the cognitive skills that you can develop to help you manage differences between cultures and achieve intercultural competence. Understanding how to move through Milton J. Bennett’s (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity is one way of gaining these cognitive skills. Bennett examines attitudes toward cultural differences—intercultural sensitivity—and how they relate to intercultural competence. Intercultural sensitivity (ICS) is viewed as occurring along a continuum consisting of six different levels described below. The greater one’s intercultural sensitivity, the easier it is to become knowledgeable about the host culture and function effectively in it. ICS isn’t something we are born with. It is only through experience and reflection upon cultural differences that people begin to view cultural differences as being positive, interesting, desirable, and as having their own internal logic within a certain culture.

A Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

![Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)]
Ethnocentrism and ethnocentric worldviews

Chances are that most of us grow up being ethnocentric. We do things the way we do because we believe it's the best way—or we would do it some other way! Ethnocentrism has two meanings: believing your own culture is superior to others and having the tendency to view other cultures in terms of one's own. The second meaning, while seemingly more benign, is still potentially damaging. It may seem OK or even natural to view other cultures by comparing them to your own, but the danger is that you might view your own culture as the central or mainstream culture against which others should be compared and judged (e.g., they are not as modern, they are too liberal). The following stages reflect ethnocentric attitudes toward others.

Denial

People in this stage are not aware that cultural differences actually exist. They also probably only understand culture as visible things (the way people dress, languages) and not as different values or beliefs. Most people in denial have had little contact with people who are culturally different. If they encounter problems in communicating or interacting with people from different cultures, they are likely to attribute the cause to personal reasons rather than cultural. Generally, they interpret these so-called “differences” as being wrong or inappropriate ways of thinking or behaving. People in this stage may say things like, “We should have no trouble interacting in the host culture as long as we can speak the same language.” This person is unable to acknowledge cultural differences.

If you identify with this stage of the scale, try these things to move forward:

- Try to meet as many people as possible from the host country and really be open to their points of view.
- Read the local newspaper. Compare the coverage in the local newspaper with an international or U.S. newspaper. Do you see different perspectives offered on the same event?

Defense

People in the defense stage also think of cultural differences as being wrong or inappropriate, but they have acknowledged that differences do exist. These people may encounter more difference in their daily lives, but they feel threatened by it and often make efforts toward justifying the correctness and superiority of their own cultural values and beliefs. Statements like “Why don’t they just act more like us?” or blatant stereotyping of groups are indicative of people in defense. Also, statements such as “When I travel abroad, it makes me realize how much better things are in the U.S.” still probably reflect defense because the person is making a blanket statement about the superiority of everything American.

If you identify with this stage of the scale, try these things to move forward:

- Search for common ground. What interests do you have in common with people in the host country? Do you watch or play the same sports? Listen to the same music? Celebrate the same holidays?
- Challenge yourself to find something, no matter how small, that you

There is an interesting version of defense where the person positively evaluates and feels more a part of the new culture than his or her own culture. This is called reversal and is also characterized by a negative evaluation of one’s original culture. But it is still defense in that one culture is seen as superior to another.

Minimization

In this stage, people minimize cultural differences and instead prefer to focus on similarities between groups of people. They might say something like, “We’re all human beings after all,” or “Why do we always have to emphasize what makes people different? People are people.” What makes this minimization is that the person typically perceives that others are “like me” and does not recognize how others are different. What makes such statements ethnocentric is that the frame of reference is “me” or “my culture.” The key point is not that we should ignore similarities, but rather that similarities and differences need to be understood in order to truly understand the culture.

If you identify with this stage of the scale, try these things to move forward:

- Challenge yourself to get more involved with your host country. Join a club or sports team and notice the similarities and differences in how the group operates compared to teams at home.
- When talking with your new friends from the host country, try to suspend any thoughts such as “Yes, that’s exactly how I feel,” or “Yes, it’s very similar in the U.S.” Instead, try to push those thoughts aside and really listen to your friends’ views and make sure that you don’t miss key differences.
- Read more local newspapers, books, and magazines to learn how people in the host country really view the world.
- Listen to news talk shows and go to forums and lectures to find out the historical and contemporary perspectives on current issues.

Ethnorelativism and ethnorelative worldviews

Ethnorelative is a term coined by Milton Bennett to characterize those who no longer view their own culture as a center from which others should be judged, but rather as a state of mind in which cultures are respected, compared, and contrasted according to the perspectives of the cultures involved. Read on to discover more about the ethnorelative stages.

Acceptance

This is the first ethnorelative stage, and it involves what might be described as a

significant shift in thinking.
stage have ceased looking at cultural differences as negative, but simply as existing. There is a good deal of awareness of cultural differences, and respect is given to groups who are culturally different. There may not be a lot of deep understanding of individual cultures, but there exists the interest and capacity to learn about other cultures. A statement such as “My life is enriched by my relationships with people from different backgrounds and experiences” signifies acceptance because the person is interested in others from different cultures.

If you identify with this stage of the scale, try these things to move forward:

- As suggested in earlier stages, challenge yourself to get even more involved in the culture. You need to be immersed in conversations not only to recognize behavioral and value differences, but also to figure out how to adapt to these new behaviors and values.
- Invite your new friends over for dinner and host a conversation on a timely topic. Give yourself a chance to see your friends relaxed and conversing so that you can learn and join in!
- Try out the journaling methods discussed in this guide (p. 119). You can revisit key events—either because they were initially confusing, exciting, or overwhelming—and try to dig deeper into the cultural nuances. You could even try sharing some of your journal entries with others to see if together you can come to a deeper understanding of key behavioral and value differences, as well as sort out what is personal and what is cultural in any particular incident.

**Reflection**

Now that you have had an overview of the Bennett model of intercultural sensitivity, you probably have given some thought to how these stages apply to you. Keep in mind that you are likely to have a dominant worldview, one that organizes your way of thinking about difference, but that other elements of the model can also be a part of your intercultural sensitivity. This is the case because intercultural sensitivity is developmental and constantly changing.

So, which aspects of the Bennett model apply to you? One way to answer that question is to think about an intercultural experience you have had and how you reacted. Were you uncomfortable in the situation? Did you find yourself becoming judgmental? Did you want to focus on your similarities and avoid mention of your differences? Were you intrigued with the cultural differences, finding that you wanted to learn more? Did you enjoy adapting to the situation?

Intercultural experiences provide us with the opportunity to develop new understandings and skills, as well as the chance to reflect on what we already know and can do. The more exposure we have to people from other cultures, the greater the opportunity to develop our intercultural skills.

This model is intended to help you become more aware of cultural differences that can lead to deeper learning, of your attitude toward cultural differences, and of your ability to look at things from multiple perspectives. It may sound easy enough, but in reality this type of personal development usually requires a substantial amount of intercultural contact, knowledge, and experience.