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Lesson 3
Inter-Cultural Competence

Learning Objectives

At the end of the lesson, participants will be able to:

- Define culture
- Identify the characteristics of inter-cultural competence
- Identify how to improve understanding between people with different cultures
- Recognise the challenges and opportunities of building trust between diverse cultural groups

This lesson provides civilian, military, and police leaders with an understanding of culture and characteristics of inter-cultural competence. Building trust between diverse stakeholders requires cross-cultural communication. Improving skills in inter-cultural competence can in turn improve civil-military-police coordination.

1. What is intercultural competence?

Intercultural competence is a skillset that can be learned and developed to build effective working relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds.[8] Complex environments include people with many different cultures. Complex environments require each stakeholder to relate to other stakeholders who belong to different cultural groups. This requires specific skills in cross-cultural communication and trust building. Culture cannot be summarised in a short list of rules. Lists of cultural dos and don'ts cannot provide the critical thinking skills necessary to build trusting relationships.

Intercultural competence is a way of "seeing" the world, to identify both the common ground and the differences between groups of people. Intercultural competence is like putting on a pair of glasses or binoculars that bring the world into sharper focus.

Without cultural competence, leaders are not able to find common ground and communicate effectively with other stakeholders in the environment. They remain isolated and unable to understand the context. They take actions that are more likely to result in unintended impacts. Cross-cultural competence is an essential element of adaptive leadership in complex environments.

2. Culture is a pattern of learned behaviour.
All human beings are very similar in terms of our genes. There are no groups of people that are better than others. Intelligence is not higher in some cultural groups than in others.

Culture includes the values and behaviours learned and shared within a group. Families, communities, schools, religious organisations and other institutions create and educate people in cultural ways of being. Each person views the world through a "cultural lens." Each person's cultural lens limit their perceptions, or the way we view the world. Every person's "worldview" is incomplete, as we each understand only part of the world around us.

Cultural practices have a history. All traditions, rituals and cultural ways of doing things have a history and began at a certain point in time when someone created them for a certain purpose

Every culture has practices that seems strange to others. But we know the history of this cultural practice, so it makes sense to us within its context. But when communicating with people in other cultures, we may not know the origin of all of their cultural practices.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

-Maya Angelou

3. **Cultural groups are similar and different.**
People in different cultures can find commonalities, but must also acknowledge their differences. Intercultural competence is not a glossing over of the real differences between cultures. Instead, intercultural competence both identifies the differences and builds on the commonalities. Some cultures value beauty and art while others place more value on technology and economic wealth. Intercultural competence requires skills to detect and respect the values and symbols that are important to other cultural groups.

4. **Intercultural competence begins with recognising our own cultures**.
Every individual belongs to different identity groups. Each identity group has its own culture. We can only begin to understand and communicate with people who belong to other cultures when we have a good understanding of how we learned the values and behaviours in our own culture. The diagram in
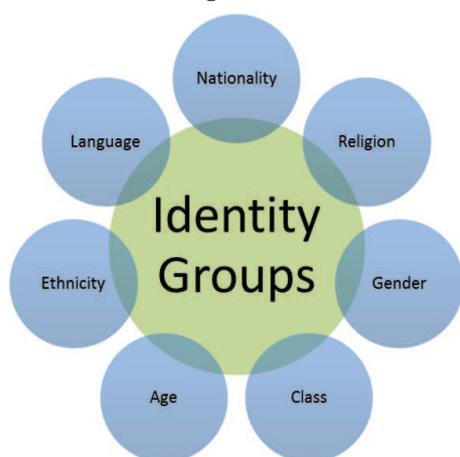
Figure 4 illustrates the many different cultural groups to which any one person may belong.

Each person already holds some level of intercultural competence as they move between different identity groups in their own life. Identity groups are the same thing as "cultures." _Identity_ is a way we define ourselves and a way others see us.[9]

People of the same age – also known as "age mates" – often share a culture. People of the same religion, of the same ethnicity, or the same language or class may also share some aspects of culture. Each of these circles in the diagram here represents an "identity." Everyone belongs to multiple cultural identity groups.

Figure 4: Identity Groups

For example, an individual might show respect to his or her grandmother in one cultural way and to his or her neighbour or work colleague in another way depending on their identity. Understanding identity and culture begins with self-assessment. Each person can draw a map of their identity and the cultural groups to whom they belong.

5. Showing respect to others is a key intercultural competency.
While some ethics and values are different across cultures, the values of honour, dignity, and belonging to a group are found across all cultures. All people in every culture want to feel respected by others.

Demonstrating respect for other people is a skill. It is communicated in different ways, in different cultures. Learning how to show respect to people in different cultures is essential to cross-cultural communication and trust building. Module 6 in this *Handbook* provides an introduction to the communication skills necessary for building relationships with respect and trust.

Respecting a person's humanity and treating people with dignity does not require agreeing with them. It does require learning to express disagreement in a respectful way. Respect is a currency; it is a resource. The most important skill any leader can exercise is showing respect to others. It costs nothing. But it can greatly improve relationships.

Humiliation is the opposite of respect. Punishment feels like humiliation. Though the intent of punishment and humiliation is to defeat and deter others, the impact of humiliation often leads to increased levels of conflict and violence.

6. **"Monoculturalism" prevents cross-cultural understanding.**
Many people are _monocultural_ meaning they understand the world only from their own cultural point of view and they cannot see the world from other points of view. Without intercultural competence to understand the world from different cultural points of view, people of all different cultures often resort to stereotyping.

7. Stereotyping decreases trust.
Stereotyping is a simple way to group people together according to their culture and generalise about the way all of them think and act. Stereotyping assumes that all people within a cultural group are similar.

> **Some people use the word "respect" to mean "treating someone like a person."**
>
> **Other people use the word "respect" to mean "treating someone like an authority."**
>
> **Sometimes people who are used to being treated like an authority say "if you won't respect me I won't respect you" and they mean "if you won't treat me like an authority I won't treat you like a person."**

We know from our own cultures that even within a cultural group, there is wide variation between individuals. All young people are not the same. All people of ___ race or culture are not all the same. It is not possible to meaningfully guess whether a person is smart or not so smart depending on their culture.

Intercultural competence helps people to see that there is wide variation between individuals in every culture. Stereotyping generally decreases trust between groups. People who feel "pre-judged" by others may feel frustrated. Even if the stereotype of a group is positive, people feel unfairly obliged to live into a stereotype that simply is not true for every individual.

Intercultural competence requires us to judge people based on the individual character, not on the basis of a stereotype of other people in their culture. Judging each person as a individual, rather than prejudging them based on often negative stereotypes can prevent civil-military-police coordination and obstruct human security.

8. **"Ethnocentrism" means that people believe their own culture is better than others**.
It is common for people to grow up being taught to think of life as a competition between groups. Some people refer to this as an "us" versus "them" mentality. People tend to see their own culture as evolved and civilised, while they often see other cultures as morally inferior and uncivilised. It may be easier to

point fingers at the problems in other people's culture rather than examine the challenges in our own cultures. For example, different cultures have different ideas of sexuality. One culture may encourage women to cover their heads. Another may encourage women to wear high heels. Women in each culture may look at the other as oppressed, but feel their own culture is superior.

A fundamental idea in intercultural competence is learning that there is no "normal." "Normal" is only normal to you and your identity group. Cross-cultural communication begins with humility, to recognise there are common challenges in each culture, and no culture is superior to others. Intercultural competence requires a critical eye on one's own culture.

9. Trust building requires smart risks.

Trusting others is always a risk. But without trust, there would be no civilisation, no rule of law, no community or religion. Human beings rely on trust in order to live together. Building trust across cultural divides requires smart risks. There are also risks and costs of not having trust with others. These costs can outweigh the risk of building trust across cultural groups. While distrusting other groups and relying only on those in your own unit or organisation may seem safe, it will be impossible to solve difficult challenges driving violent conflict, or design a future that protects the needs and interests of all groups. Leaders who take smart risks to build cross-cultural trust will find that the benefits of building relationships often create unanticipated rewards in terms of improved understanding of and planning for working in a complex environment.

> "Search for Common Ground" is the name of one of the world's largest peacebuilding NGOs. Their approach is to "identify the differences and build on the common ground" - a core principle of all conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes.
>
> * Read case studies of Search for Common Ground's approach to building relationships between civil society, military and police in *Local Ownership in Security*, the companion report to this *Handbook*.

10. Building trust requires understanding the values, interests and perspectives of other people.

Learning to actively listen to other people and to affirm that you have heard and understood their point of view, even if you disagree with it, is one of the most important aspects of trust building. People who feel listened to have more trust in the person who has understood them.

11. Building trust across cultures requires humility and transparency.

Humility is the acknowledgement that we are not better than others and that we make mistakes. Transparency is the openness to recognise our positive capacities and interests, but also our shortcomings and the negative effects that our actions may have on others. Leaders with intercultural competence build trust by demonstrating transparency and humility in their relationships with others. Self-assessment, the focus of the next lesson, is important to intercultural competence.

12. Building trust across cultural divides requires finding common ground.

Finding common ground can open a door to building the trust that is required to address differences and conflicts between groups. Finding common ground happens by determining the areas in which cultural groups overlap. They may share values and experiences. For example, young people around the world hold many different religions and ethnicities, but many share an interest in music, sports, and popular culture. These commonalities can provide an opportunity to bring people together across the lines of conflict to address problems.

REVIEW

This lesson introduced the concept of intercultural competence as a key skill for building trust between diverse stakeholders working in a complex environment. Each person holds many different identities and belongs to different cultures. We can learn most about how to move between cultures by examining our own lives and how we already do this. Intercultural competence is ultimately about finding common ground and learning how to show respect to people from other cultural groups.

Citations

8 Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*, (New York: Pearson, 2009).

9 Jay Rothman. *From Identity-Based Conflict to Identity-Based Cooperation: The ARIA Approach in Theory and Practice*, (New York: Springer, 2012).

Lesson 3   Learning Exercises

Anchor   *10 minutes*

To begin the lesson, anchor the content in this lesson with a series of questions:
- What are some of the challenges of communicating with someone different from yourself?
- What factors make people different? What influences how people think and act?

Add   *20 minutes*

Present the PowerPoint slides or ask participants to discuss the lesson readings in a small group.

Apply   *25 minutes*

The goal of this exercise is to practice intercultural competence skills of showing respect to other stakeholders. Showing respect to other stakeholders is a way to build trust between groups with different cultures. Each scenario stakeholder team has ten minutes to identify a culturally appropriate symbol for showing respect to three of the other stakeholder teams with whom they would most want to build trust. Then the scenario facilitator will begin the role-play. Each team will have twenty minutes to attempt to build trust with other teams by making a gesture of respect. Debrief this experience.
- How would the teams likely perceive and respond to the other team's gestures of respect?
- What did you learn about adaptive leadership in this role play?

See the "Scenario-based Learning" section in the Handbook on Human Security: A Civil-Military-Police Curriculum for explanation of the scenarios and teams.

Alternate Exercise:
This exercise aims to help participants reflect on the cultural geography of any city. It emphasises that culture is not just something that other people have in other countries. Seeing the cultural elements in one's own community provides a foundation for identifying cultural elements in complex environments where violent conflict may be occurring.

Ask participants or small groups of participants from the same cultural background to imagine walking down the main street of the town or city where they live.

Draw a map or make a list of what you see that informs you about:
-the role of religion
-the ethics and values
-the roles of men and women
-the value of children and elders
-the rules for acting in public

Away   *5 minutes*

In a large group, participants can discuss this question:

What will I take away from this lesson on the security sector that might impact the way I do my work

in the future?
- If I could go back in time, what would I do differently in a past work experience if I could use cross-cultural communication and trust-building skills?
- What will I do differently in the future given the ideas in this lesson?