



Why Is Cultural Adaptability Important?

Employees at all levels of contemporary organizations bring different values, expectations, and perspectives—their culture—with them to work. Those differences affect how individuals in these organizations lead, manage, and interact with others, and how the work gets done.

There are many definitions of culture, but one common idea explicit in all of the definitions is that culture is shared. Culture includes, among other things, beliefs about what is acceptable or unacceptable conduct within a society or group of people. It includes deeply held values and beliefs that influence behavior which can be interpreted in many different ways by people outside of that culture. Culture also includes expectations about how people will behave in particular situations or relationships.

Many employees today—many people generally—understand that they work with, serve, and are surrounded by people with different mind-sets and expectations based on different backgrounds. Many employees, although not all, may also understand that responding to those people with “that isn’t the way we do things here” just isn’t going to work in a world that grows ever more connected. Managers often interact daily with peers, bosses, direct reports, and others from different cultures, and they often handle those interactions poorly, causing avoidable misunderstandings, frustrations, and stress.

As a manager you can’t expect to know exactly how to behave in every different place or with every different person. But you can appreciate the importance of a skill such as cultural adaptability, because the people with whom you work think and act differently from you.

When Worlds Collide

For a dramatic view of how cultural differences affect results, consider the example of the \$125 million Mars Climate Orbiter. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched that spacecraft at the end of 1998 for a mission that would put it in orbit around the red planet about a year later. Two teams of engineers working on the orbiter's navigational software carried out their work using two incompatible measuring systems – metric (meters and grams, for example) and English (feet and pounds, for example). The project's leadership did not notice, or did not check, whether the unit translations had been carried out. Each team assumed that its method was correct and did not expect that the other team would use a different method. On September 23, 1999, the orbiter approached Mars at an altitude of about 37 miles, instead of the planned 93 miles. Plunging into the planet's thin atmosphere, it incinerated within minutes.

Why did each team believe its method was correct? Because each was working under a particular set of rules, norms, and expectations. People often assume that others act under the same set of rules as they do. When they don't meet those expectations, conflict (and even disaster) results.