

Cultural Intelligence – An Important Factor for Successful Work Abroad

Dr. Boyd Johnson

Chair of the doctoral program in Organizational Leadership, Department of Organizational Leadership, Indiana Wesleyan University

Holding a Ph.D. In International Studies (from Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, England), Dr. Johnson has worked in international development for over 16 years and taught in higher education for over 17 years. Dr. Johnson has work experience in over 60 countries. He served as Senior Research Associate, Operations Director and Director of Resources at World Vision, a non-profit international relief and development agency, living in seven countries.

Globalization impacts working patterns of employees from large and small countries all over the world. More people are starting careers in the global companies, and working in international teams abroad. As a result of these new needs, university curriculums are changing in order to meet expectations and prepare graduates for dealing with different cultures in diverse work spaces. Some schools in the USA even require a semester abroad for program completion. Recruiters of leading corporations often look for candidates with strong intercultural skills who can function well and manage culturally mixed teams. Consequently, intercultural communication, international HR and global team management are becoming an integral part of the skillset for successful employees in the world job market. Professionals who try to stay marketable and successful explore different ways of testing, assessing and developing intercultural skills in order to meet expectations of global employers. Researchers also put a good deal of effort into analysis of different aspects of global team operations, including cross-cultural communication and specifics of intercultural management. One of the popular concepts for assessment is based on the Cultural Intelligence theory (CQ).

CQ Theory and the CQS Tool

Cultural Intelligence is a relatively new, but very popular concept first introduced in 2003. The tool based on this concept helps measure the capability of individuals to operate effectively in the international setting. The level of cultural intelligence directly impacts performance and adjustment of the person in multicultural environment. The CQ scale (CQS) includes 20 questions with four factors: drive (metacognitive), knowledge (cognitive), strategy (motivational), and action (behavioral). It is not only about knowledge of other cultures, but it is also about initial drive, awareness, interest, curiosity (conciseness), further motivation and final action in culturally diverse teams. The tool was initially tested across two cultures, the US and Singapore, and then widely used in Western, Eastern and Central Europe. International field research data provides examples of CQ assessments of individual levels, departments, companies and even nation-wide country samples. The CQ concept is well accepted in both business and

public sector and extensively used in management, organizational psychology, and leadership. The Cultural Intelligence Center in Michigan (USA) uses research to assess, predict, and develop intercultural effectiveness by conducting professional development trainings and certifications courses for interested experts.

Individual Level of Cultural Intelligence and Performance

Field research published in peer reviewed academic articles indicates that CQ predicts many aspects of performance. Individuals with a high level of CQ cope with different cultural contexts better and excel at work. They understand drivers and barriers of internal company communication and negotiate well on a multicultural team. Staff with high CQ is better at decision making in settings with high cultural diversity. Employees with low CQ level often face a lot of challenges and encounter many issues due to conflict and communication barriers. Low CQ levels of employees are directly linked to adjustment and poor performance in international teams.

In the experience of the author, Cultural Intelligence is a critical element in successful foreign assignments. While living in seven countries, it was very evident in observing workplace settings that technical skills were not enough for individuals to be a success. If they had high CQ, they could adapt better to new cultural contexts, and had a more positive attitude toward the local culture. Co-workers usually responded well to this mindset, and the work of teams with these individuals usually was more productive.

Assessing and Developing CQ of Staff

Some individual have innate high CQ; others work hard in order to develop this specific skillset. Business leaders of international teams often have a clear understanding that staff with higher CQ levels have a stronger ability to interact with the colleagues on the basis of experience and education, knowledge of the systems used in communication and the rules of their functioning in different cultures. In addition, managers should be able to choose and implement effective types of verbal behavior depending on the situation, and communicate needs of the participants before and during the interaction.

Increasingly, organizational leaders understand that this pattern of CQ competencies is the first step toward enhancing the quality of the work in international teams. It has important implications for practice – especially for selecting, training and developing a qualified workforce for the international organizations. Improved CQ leads to better adjustment and stronger performance of staff in multicultural work places. Since CQ is often viewed as an essential aptitude in international corporations in the USA, many HR departments have designed professional development trainings, seminars, workshops in order to help employees cultivate

and enhance cultural intelligence. Internal staff CQ testing and further assessment of results can help develop company-specific norms, strategies, and interventions based upon what the data reveals. Knowledge of staff CQ scores can help identify improvement predictions of effectiveness operations.

Overall, this essential professional CQ competence ensures effective management in culturally diverse work environments. The Cultural Intelligence scale research shapes a new competency framework for personal and professional qualities of professionals working in global companies. These aspects could be used as a baseline in the development of detailed cross-cultural manager competency model for successful international teams. Practical use of CQ shows how well equipped staff members can successfully interact across cultures and achieve organizational results.