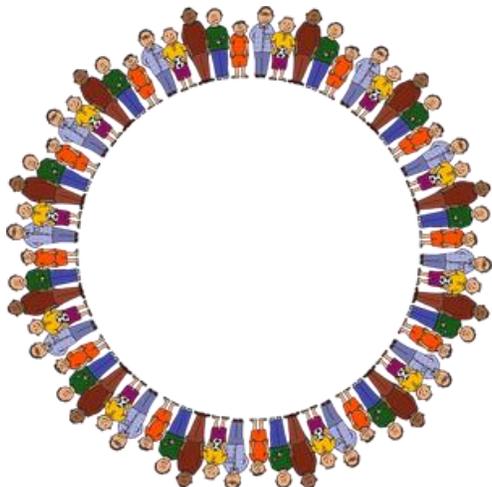


Cross-Cultural Sensitivity by Julia Wallace



We often take for granted culture, question established practices, and make assumptions from our own particular world view. This rarely supports the strong respect necessary to help others with diverse backgrounds work productively on the issues and challenges we all face.

Today, the church is not only a multi-cultural body of Christ- it also serves a globally diverse world with a myriad of cultures. Today, an ability to reach across the cultures to offer Christ and make Christ known is an essential gift that church members can share if they are culturally savvy.

The neighborhood where I grew up was a place of white faces that came from Italy, Germany, Poland or Ireland. This was reflected in the various languages spoken and the wonderful food we shared. I recognized from a very early age that people came from different places and did things differently. Yet, we had one thing in common: a desire to respectfully work together. To understand one another and be understood. This was especially true at church where we sat on committees or worked on projects side by side. One example of this happening was the various cultures that came together to build the new church building – side by side. There were many successful fundraisers: Polish Sausage sandwiches, Spaghetti Diners, Saurerkraut sales, and of course, St. Patrick’s Day Irish Corned Beef.

Today, that same neighborhood and church are full of a greater variety of cultures: European, Asian, African, and Hispanic. There are various holidays and festivals that bring people together. But the road has not always been easy!

Each culture has it’s own styles of communicating, making decisions, and resolving conflict. Gone are the days (if they ever existed), that there is one way to do things.

Perhaps you have been asked to mediate a conflict in a Korean congregation or work with a Hispanic fellowship to establish a new worship center in your community. What can you do if you find yourself working cross-culturally?

Here are some practical steps to improve your CQ (Cultural Competency):

Establish Trust

- Convey your desire to be culturally sensitive early on the process.
- Be clear about why you are there and what you need from the group to complete the work requested, as well as naming what you have to offer to the process.
- Acknowledge that you are aware that you have much to learn from the other group(s).
- Focus on the shared task ahead. Form community: hard to create – even harder to sustain.
- Be sure to seek feedback when you see people behaving in ways that are puzzling to you.

- Remember people care about what you know when they know that you care about them.
- Be vulnerable. When you do not know something or an issue is beyond your expertise, name it.
- Discover who some of the key shareholders are in the group and go to them to ask for their support to accomplish the task that you were given. Ask them what you need to know about the group's culture that would help them accept you and make you a better contributor.
- Bottom line: learn the culture you are working with (customs, ways of making decisions, even some keywords or phrases).

Get to know members of the other group

- Take the time to listen to people's stories and experiences. I often ask people to share pictures of important people or celebrations in their life with me as a way to introduce ourselves. I then do the same.
- Encourage people from the other culture to use their skills for the welfare of the entire group and the shared goals.
- Foster healthy, strong relationships among members of the group. Take time for team building.
- Establish good bonds with participants that will help you be effective in working with the group
- Don't generalize.
- Try not to intervene too quickly when people are on opposite sides of an issue or decision. Ask guiding questions to surface common ground.

Form a team of Culturally Inclusive Leaders

- This is a team of people from the group who can help you work through your process (lead listening sessions for you, remind people of meetings and assignments, lead Devotions or times of Centering, etc.
- Invite this Team to generate communications and be part of a feedback loop.
- Demonstrates an ability to work with and appreciate others cross-culturally.
- Embrace diversity. Give a little to the others on a team to accomplish and accept their way of getting the job done even if it is a method you have not used in the past. Be sure to stay in the loop and monitor how the work gets done.
- Encourage!

Promote Open, Honest Communication

- Keep instructions simple and ask for clarity when necessary
- Have an interpreter present especially if you are working with 1st generation immigrants or members of the culture who do not speak English well.
- Request that the group be direct and speak to others not about them. No triangulation.
- Avoid slang and jargon. Literal interpretations are often misunderstood.
- Learn to respect silence. It means respect in several cultures because it demonstrates a willingness to listen. Be patient when asking questions or providing choices.
- Don't accept myths about the other culture

- Resolution skills practiced should always give the work back to the people. This brings an increased awareness of how members can best resolve conflict in the future.
- Put things in writing. Ensure that they are distributed to the right people and at the same time if possible.
- Adapt customs of the culture you are working with into the process you have designed. For example, when I am working with a group from the South Pacific Islands I frequently convene a Soamoan Listening Circle to surface thoughts and feelings. It works!

Set a clear, compelling direction

- Explain the process clearly and invite questions for clarity.
- Be sure that participants understand why you are there and what the end product is of the work.
- Involve every participant in the process. Let them know that every person is essential to completing the task before them whether it is assessing a Pastor, moving to a new location, resolving conflict, etc.
- Stay focused on your goals.
- Evaluate progress by the steps you have taken to facilitate the group dealing with their issues, make good decisions, or resolve conflict.
- Don't take slow-downs personally. Listen to the stories and be patient. This is one way a culture communicates its values and boundaries.

Explore Differences Within the Group

- Treat others as they want to be treated.
- Acknowledge the "fault lines" present in the group by naming the distinctions within the group. They may be generational, gender, language, place of birth, etc.
- Know what motivates participants. Why should they work with you? What do you add that they can do themselves?
- Manage friction with sensitivity.

Create clear rules of engagement and maintain them

- Incorporate practices from various cultures. Examples include using a talking piece when speaking in the group, or sitting in a circle to hear the wisdom of the elders.
- Establish norms for behavior. I am a firm behavior in establishing a covenant with a group on how they want to be treated and treat others.
- Stick with established guidelines so you do not get off track.
- Be polite yet firm when someone acts outside of Covenant. Re-invite the person to stand inside the Covenant or let them remove themselves from the work.

Resolve Conflict Quickly

- When you observe tension in the group deal with it swiftly. Don't let it fester.
- Use the cultural perspectives of the group to serve as a cultural bridge. For example, in Asian cultures, you do not cause another person to lose face (be embarrassed in public).

Benefits of Working Cross-Culturally

Why do all this work? Why develop sensitivity and appreciation of working with various cultures beyond your own?

There are many benefits:

1. The ability to plan and adapt your work for various audiences leads to a stronger process and greater effectiveness professionally.
2. Other people bring cultural insights that you will find helpful even when working with your own culture. I have learned many tools from cross-cultural work that are fun and engaging.
3. Being collegial across cultural lines improves relationships and expands your network. I have discovered that despite cultural differences there is a common core that remains the same among humans: love, care, respect, encouragement, etc.
4. The more culturally diverse the group is, the greater the array of options generated. You get a better solution that people can live with later.
5. Because the world is growing more diverse, I find myself curious when encountering cultural distinctions. I am better for each encounter.

One of the most important things that you can do is to be a lifelong learner of working with others cross-culturally. A great resource offered by the Evangelical Lutherans in the USA is a short workbook:

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking_Together_As_Christians_Cross_Culturally_A_Field_Guide.pdf

Conclusion

Perhaps it is easier to work with people just like you yet the world is so diverse and exciting for the many people who live in this world. The odds of you encountering people from a different culture are more likely today than ever before. These encounters are not to be feared but embraced. Our challenge is to be aware of our cultural bias and blindspots.

As a church consultant, I welcome the opportunity to share my skills and abilities with others regardless of culture. It's not a barrier to me because I have learned how to be culturally sensitive and recognize that I have even further to go.

The Gospel is intended for all people regardless of where they were born or the language they speak. Wasn't it Paul who once said that in Christ there is no black or white, East or West, male or female...? The Apostle was talking about surface things that tend to divide us when in fact they are strengths that can unite us.

Perhaps the task of cross-cultural conversation and work may be to discern and develop effective ways to talk and work together. To do this, we must own our own culture and biases and be willing to embrace another's culture with curiosity and respect.

Cross-cultural sensitivity doesn't just happen. It is challenging and hard works yet it is possible to do. What's your CQ?

I hope you found this article helpful. Drop me a line and let me know your cross-cultural learnings that help shape your ministry. I'd love to hear from you!



Author: Julia Wallace

Julia is a layperson in the United Methodist Church, USA who works in Mediation and Conflict Transformation. She is co-author of the book: "The Church Guide for Making Decisions Together."