How can coaches support leaders in developing the cultural intelligence and competence needed to realize strategic objectives? Read on to discover the benefits and specific outcomes associated with cross-cultural coaching.

The explosive interest and growth in the $2.4 billion coaching market over the past decade is one response to major shifts occurring in the world of work characterized by globalization, a focus on emerging markets, rapid advances in technology, hyper-competition, demanding financial markets, and changing workforce and consumer demographics. As a result of these trends, the learning demands for today’s leaders (and hence the cultural competency requirements for coaches) have never been greater, nor have the stakes associated with success or failure. For example, research by Cutting Edge Information indicated that “70 percent of CEOs fail as a result of execution errors, rather than errors in strategy.”

Why Coaches Need to Be Culturally Competent

Two general themes emerge from the international business research:

1. High rates of expatriate failure, and
2. Inability of headquarters managers to appreciate the cultural challenges of doing business overseas.

This context provides a prime opportunity for coaching to support organizations around the world to address these global leadership challenges. Yet doing so requires that coaches themselves make developing a capacity to effectively coach across cultures a priority. An early step in this learning process for the coach is to accept the premise that one’s cultural identity (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, functional/organizational role, nationality, etc.) has a powerful influence on how people think, make decisions, behave, and define situations, including the way different identity groups define a successful coaching relationship.

Defining Culture

A variety of terms are used to describe the importance of culture in the workplace, ranging from cultural intelligence to cultural competence, cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is defined as “an individual’s capability to function, interact, and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings and backgrounds.”

Further, cultural competence is defined as “a set of aligned behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, organization, or among professionals and enables each to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.” Applied to coaching, cultural competence...
One’s cultural identity has a powerful influence on how people think, make decisions, behave and define situations, including the way different identity groups define a successful coaching relationship. 

refers to the “integration of key dimensions of the client’s cultural identity into the theories, tools and practices that guide the coaching approach with the intent of providing clients of all socio-demographic backgrounds with relevant services focused on achieving their desired results”.

Examples of Cross-cultural Coaching Engagements
- Leading a multigenerational workforce
- Coaching newly minted organizational chief diversity officers
- Working with leadership teams during mergers and acquisitions
- Coaching sales professionals with diverse clients in diverse markets
- Facilitating new multinational product/service development teams
- Supporting leaders and their families as they prepare for international assignments
- Providing multi-rater feedback (e.g. 360) to executive development program participants from multiple countries.

Advantages of Coaching Across Cultures

The benefits of leveraging cultural diversity in the workplace for individuals, groups and organizations has been well documented; today there is a real opportunity for coaches to help clients realize the benefits of diversity while managing its challenges (e.g. increased complexity, conflict and miscommunication). A personal development plan for coaches focused on building cultural competence seeks to answer two questions: (1) How to prepare the coach to be culturally competent and (2) How to integrate cultural competence into the coaching approach.

1. How do coaches prepare to be culturally competent?

a) Assess Cultural Self Awareness and Capability Levels

A starting point for coaches is to understand the origins of their own cultural programming by holistically examining one’s personal identity at three levels:
- Individual (areas of uniqueness – like no other),
- Group (values, beliefs, rules and social practices shared with identity groups – similarities and differences based on group identities such as marital status, geographic location, religious preference and other cultural dimensions), and
- Universal (common life experiences such as love, sadness, death and others). There are a number of assessments available to help coaches deepen their cultural self-awareness prior to assisting their clients to do the same (e.g. Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge Inventory, Intercultural Development Inventory, Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory, Cross-Cultural World Mindedness, Cultural Stock Inventory, and Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale). A focus on cultural self-awareness expands the core coaching competency of coaching presence (i.e. inside-out work).

b) Establish a Cultural Knowledge Base

Next en route to cultural competence is having a clear framework for understanding cultural dynamics – predictable patterns that emerge when members from two or more identity groups interact. Similarly, there are research-based frameworks to assist in this area including:
- Hofstede’s Five Cultural Dimensions (individualism, power distance, certainty, achievement and time orientation), and
- Cultural Navigator’s 10 Orientations (environment, time, action, communication, space, power, individualism, competitiveness, structure and thinking – two or more dimensions each). A focus on cultural social awareness expands the core coaching competency of trust and intimacy (i.e. out-in work).

c) Build Skills to Communicate, Listen and Coach Cross-Culturally


Upon engaging in the above self-work and the acquisition of cultural knowledge, coaches come to understand that the cultural context of coaching theories shapes the definition of coaching competencies and what is considered ‘appropriate’ in professional coaching, yet culture is much too complex a phenomenon to have such a single, universal standard. Armed with such insight, coaches are positioned to take informed action when engaging with clients in a cross-cultural context and can adapt their implementation of core coaching competencies in culturally appropriate ways.

The result is increased confidence and coaching approaches experienced as relevant to culturally diverse clients.

### Stakeholder Benefits of Developing a Capacity for Coaching Across Cultures

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<th>COACHES</th>
<th>CLIENTS</th>
<th>GROUPS</th>
<th>ORGANIZATIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td>5. Expanded Reach &amp; Relevance</td>
<td>5. Personal Reward</td>
<td>5. Creativity/Innovation</td>
<td>5. Overall Effectiveness</td>
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### Culturally competent coaches do their homework in advance of accepting cross-cultural coaching engagements, which often involve high degrees of interpersonal and systemic complexity.

2. **How do culturally competent coaches engage with clients?**

Culturally competent coaches do their homework in advance of accepting cross-cultural coaching engagements, which often involve high degrees of interpersonal and systemic complexity. They work with clients to:

- **Create Awareness** — identify the goal/desired outcome of coaching; explore attitudes, beliefs and values that shape how the client frames situation; determine surface success indicators and relevant cultural factors that serve as potential enablers and barriers given the specific cultural context;

- **Build Skills** — develop a capacity to engage in cultural due diligence (i.e. assessing potential impact of culture); style switching (i.e. a broad and flexible behavioral repertoire guided by situational cultural dimensions); dialogue to close cultural gaps and create synergy through powerful conversations; and cultural coaching to facilitate attention and energy toward learning appropriate norms, practices and related conventions; and

- **Apply** — leverage learning in real-world situations; reflect on action; and cull out lessons learned from experience to take more informed, culturally-appropriate future action to sustain accomplishments.

By building cultural competence, coaches can make an impact with and for their clients.

### References