

Topic 3.3: Building Intercultural Competence

1. Meaning of Intercultural Competence

In a globalized world, intercultural encounters are omnipresent and affect nearly everyone. Whether negotiating with international partners, managing a diverse client base, leading a multicultural team or simply working in a multicultural environment, most of us are regularly faced with intercultural situations (Nardon, 2017, p. 4). This shows that learning about other cultures and understanding them is one of the key competences today, which is not only necessary for being successful in multicultural work environments, but also for being more open and mindful in one's individual life.

“Through socialization in a cultural community, we acquire a collection of perspectives, beliefs, values, assumptions, worldviews, habits, and ways of life that influence our attitudes and behaviours in ways that we are often unaware of. Culture constrains our behaviour by providing limits around what is considered acceptable and by providing us with habits and skills that shape how we behave” (Nardon, 2017, p. 8).

Therefore, cultural competence can be described as the ability to behave instinctively in appropriate ways that fit to the cultural group to which we belong and which we understand. However, when it comes to an intercultural interaction, our usual values, behaviour patterns and beliefs might not be shared. In order to behave more appropriately when interacting intercultural, the automatic and instinctive behaviour should be suspended and new behaviour patterns must be developed (Nardon, 2017, pp. 8-9). “Thus, intercultural competence is the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive and behavioural orientations to the world” (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009, p. 7).

As reported by Deardorff (2006, p. 254) the basic elements of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills, and attitudes which lead to internal and external outcomes.

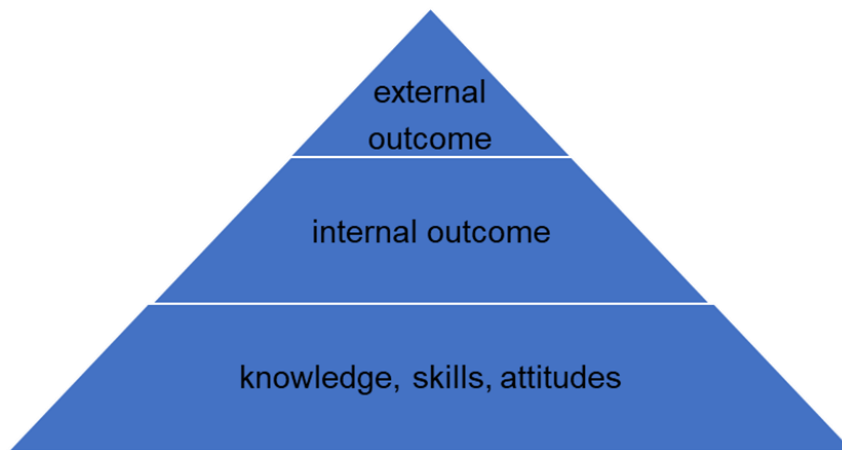


Figure 1: Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence
Source: adapted from Deardorff, 2006, p. 254

In the following these elements of intercultural competence are described in more detail according to Deardorff (2006, pp. 254):

Knowledge includes cultural self-awareness, which means deep understanding and knowledge of other cultures. Furthermore, knowledge includes culture-specific information and sociolinguistic awareness.

Skills contain listening, observing and interpreting as well as analysing, evaluating and relating.

Attitudes refer to respect for other cultures, which includes valuing other cultures and cultural diversity. Another important attitude is openness towards intercultural learning and people from other cultures as well as withholding judgement. Furthermore, curiosity and discovery of other cultures, which includes tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty, are essential attitudes.

The above-mentioned knowledge, skills and attitudes lead to internal outcomes which refer to an individual who learns to be flexible, in terms of selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviours. In addition, the individual learns to be adaptive to different communication styles and behaviours as well as to new cultural environments.

These qualities of internal outcomes are reflected in external outcomes which means behaving and communicating appropriately based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. As a result, the external outcomes measure the intercultural competence of the individual.

2. Intercultural Learning Process

First, intercultural interactions require suspending automatic cultural reactions and trying out new, alternative behaviours. Over time, these newly learned reactions become part of the behavioural repertoire and can be easily put into practice. However, during the intercultural learning process, these new behaviours may require focused attention and effort both during and after intercultural interactions (Nardon, 2017, p. 9).

2.1 Transformative learning

Transformative learning is a theory of adult education that is particularly useful for understanding the process of intercultural learning and the development of intercultural competence (Mezirow, 1990). According to the theory of transformative learning, learning is a process of revising one's mental models, which leads to changes in the interpretation of experience and action (Nardon, 2017, p. 9). A mental model means a picture of one's mind about how the world works (Hill, 1996). They enable to understand the world and how to behave in different situations. Furthermore, they are abstractions of the world that help to quickly absorb information and to figure out what is important in order to simplify personal experiences. People are largely unaware of their mental models, as they are often below the level of consciousness and do not require any conscious thought (Nardon, 2017, p. 10). Although mental models are necessary to organize experiences and facilitate everyday actions, they distort the perception of reality by operating as filters to see the world. The less people are exposed to different cultures, the more likely they are to have mental models based on a limited set of assumptions and world views. If intercultural learning is to be effective, it needs therefore to be transformative, as it requires a critical re-evaluation of assumptions, beliefs and premises embedded in mental models (Nardon, 2017, p. 10).

2.2 Experience and Learning

Experience has long been recognized as an important aspect of learning in general and of intercultural learning in particular. Sending people abroad is a common strategy used by organizations and academic institutions to develop the intercultural competence of staff and students. Despite the crucial role of experience in developing intercultural skills, recent studies show that international or intercultural experiences do not always lead to learning and

indicate that simply sending people abroad is not enough for developing intercultural competence (Rosenblatt, Worthley and MacNab, 2013; Caligiuri, 2013). People may even go abroad and hold on to their own cultural views more than ever instead of learning how to deal with different points of view and developing new and broader perspectives. A key step in transforming experiences to develop intercultural competence is the desire and ability of individuals to understand experienced discrepancies through self-reflection and to integrate what they have learned into their mental models. In order to learn from experience and develop intercultural competence, it is necessary to reflect on what has happened in an unbiased way, consider its causes and consequences and identify implications for future behaviour (Nardon, 2017, p. 10).

The following figure illustrates this intercultural learning process:

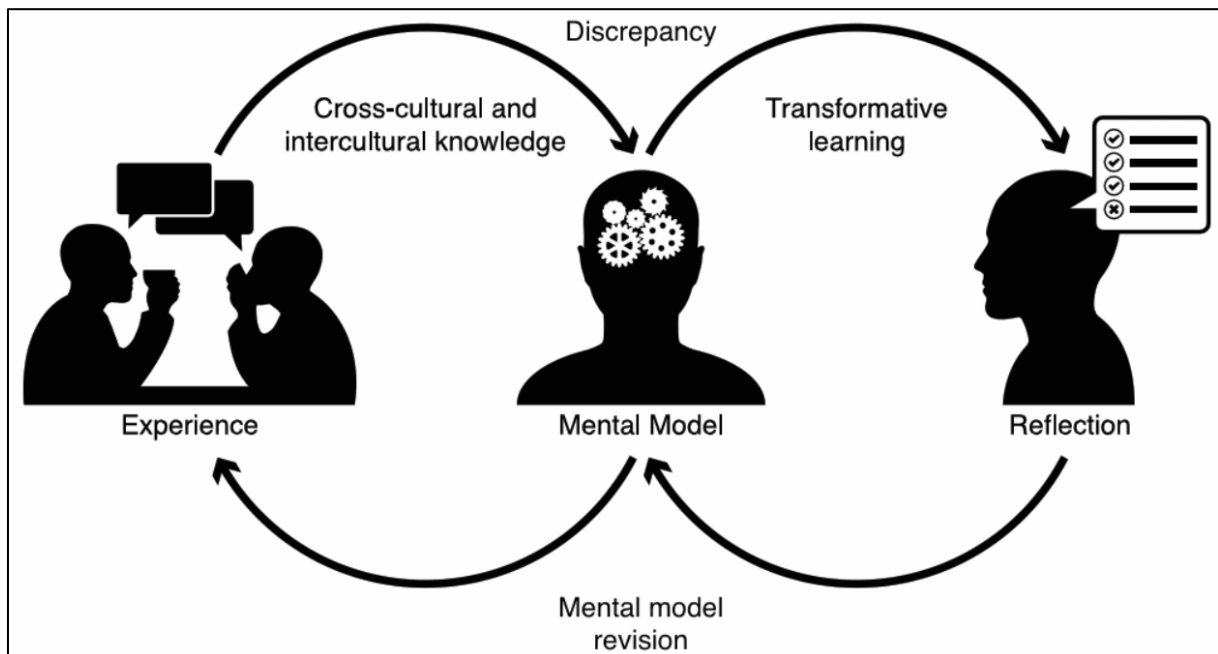


Figure 2: Intercultural Learning Process
Source: adapted from Nardon, 2017, p. 13

3. Stages in Intercultural Development

Working in multicultural environments requires a sophisticated mental model, covering a repertoire of thinking processes and behaviours which helps to cope with ambiguous and dynamic intercultural situations. This intercultural mental model allows to consider, during an intercultural interaction, the requirements of the specific situation, the expectations of others as well as our own in order to choose the most appropriate behaviour. Mental models are dynamic and evolve over time, usually in three stages (Nardon, 2017, p. 12).

3.1 Monocultural Mental Model

The first stage regarding intercultural development, is called the 'monocultural mental model'. People with a monocultural mental model are hardly aware of intercultural differences. Their own cultural ideas, values and beliefs are taken for granted. They may have some general stereotypes about other cultures and rely on their own cultural knowledge and skills when dealing with intercultural interactions. Facing a problem, they will try to resolve the symptoms, but may not understand the causes of the problem. A monocultural mental model is often the result of a monocultural life experience because people do not engage with other cultures. At this stage, it is helpful to be guided by a coach or mentor in order to understand cultural differences in a way that promotes awareness of one's own cultural repertoire and supports the achievement of goals (Nardon, 2017, p. 15).

3.2 Cross-Cultural Mental Model

People with a cross-cultural mental model understand cultural differences through study, observation or travel experience. They understand that cultures are different and influence behaviour, and they can follow certain basic cultural rules (e.g. do not challenge the boss in hierarchical cultures). When confronted with intercultural interactions, these individuals may recognize the existence of cultural discrepancies and problems (e.g. disagreement over punctuality), but they may lack behavioural techniques that go beyond simply adapting to the other culture. People with a cross-cultural mental model do not necessarily need more cultural information to increase their intercultural competence. Rather, they need the ability to fully understand cultural information and develop the skills to use that information to act

more effectively. The path of development from a cross-cultural to an intercultural mental model includes critical reflection aimed at improving sensory skills (Nardon, 2017, pp. 15-17).

3.3 Intercultural Mental Model

A sophisticated intercultural mental model is more complex than a cross-cultural mental model and includes self-awareness and situational awareness. People with a high degree of intercultural competence understand the potentially wide range of norms and behaviours that exist in different situations and are highly aware of the situation unfolding in front of them. People with an intercultural mental model are not only able to recognize the dynamics of an unfolding interaction and the demands and constraints imposed on the situation by culture. They are also fully aware of their own role in shaping situations. In addition, they are able to critically identify how and why their assumptions limit what they perceive, understand and feel. This awareness can be used to choose from a repertoire of behaviours to influence and shape interactions, to increase understanding and create opportunities for cooperation (Nardon, 2017, pp. 17-18).

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