



A Model for Personal Change: Developing Intercultural Sensitivity

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Does increasing diversity in the workplace require people to have greater cultural sensitivity to each other? There is little doubt that the answer is yes. But then you may ask: "How do I define cultural sensitivity and how do I integrate such a concept into a training program?" This article will give you some ideas.

The model, developed by Milton Bennett,* tries to explain how people make sense of differences. This model is valuable because it shows a progression of stages people may go through, including strategies for helping people move from one stage to another. Some people may stop in a stage and not progress further; others may occasionally move backwards.

To help you think visually, we placed a drawing of the model at the end of this document. The model is divided into "Ethnocentric Stages" and "Ethnorelative Stages." "Ethnocentric" may be defined as using your own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously. "Ethnorelative" is a word coined to express the opposite of ethnocentric; it refers to a person who is comfortable with many standards and customs and who can adapt his/her behavior and judgments to many interpersonal settings. Here are the stages in the model:

Denial. Example: *"Tokyo is no different than New York, lots of cars and tall buildings."* A person in the Denial Stage has a few categories to notice differences. Also, a person in this stage may attribute sub-human qualities to those from different cultures and regard them with extreme prejudice. *Strategies:* The use of non-threatening cultural awareness activities is appropriate (ethnic luncheons,

entertainment by cultural groups, travelogues, talks on history, exhibits). The purpose is to help people begin to recognize differences.

Defense. Example: *"Women are not aggressive enough, they'll never fit in at this level."* People in the Defense Stage make statements that indicate they feel threatened. The most common reaction at this stage is to denigrate the differences or to create negative stereotypes. An alternative response in this stage is to promote one's cultural superiority. *Strategies:* Emphasize the things cultures have in common, and what is "good" in all cultures. To argue that cultures are not good or bad, just different, is not appropriate at this stage. A few people may reverse and denigrate members of their own group; for example, an American whose exclusive concern is with "the ugly American." Since focus on commonalities is the goal, look for similar examples of ethnocentrism in other cultures. Be aware that some people may want to slip back into Denial because on the surface it feels more comfortable than at the Defense stage.

Minimalization. Example: *"The best thing to do when being interviewed by a Japanese employer is just be yourself."* People in the Minimalization Stage believe that cultural differences are just superficial; the basic qualities of being human will suffice. Western values of individuality, openness and honesty contribute to this view. Sometimes people with overseas experience find a haven in this stage – it sounds cultural sensitive and it allows them to avoid feelings of incompetence in the face of many cultural unknowns. Moving into the next stage represents "a major conceptual shift," from an ethnocentric position that relies on simple

principles (i.e. either/or) to an ethnorelative stage where answers are not so clear. *Strategies:* For Westerners, handling this shift inductively seems best. Use simulation exercises, personal stories, "representatives" from other cultures (choose carefully) to show how behavior can be interpreted differently. Acknowledge the discomfort people may feel during this shift; it is normal.

Acceptance. Example: *"I know my boss, a black woman, and I, a white male, have very different life experiences, but we're learning how to work together."* People in the Acceptance Stage enjoy recognizing and exploring differences. They are fairly tolerant of ambiguity and are comfortable knowing there's no one right answer (although there are better answers for particular contexts). *Strategies:* Stress recognition and respect of behavioral differences; focus on verbal and nonverbal communication styles. Emphasize practical application in the form of intercultural communication skills. Encourage the view that what is different is also appropriate. Learning to respect differences distinguishes this stage from the previous one. Moving too quickly to a discussion of values, however, may be threatening and result in a move backward.

Adaptation. Example: *"To solve this dispute, I need to change my behavior to account for the difference in status between myself and my Arab colleague."* People in the Adaptation Stage can intentionally shift their frame of reference (e.g. consider the greater influence of status in some cultures); they can empathize, or take the other person's perspective. They can choose to act in alternative ways, based on their intercultural perception. People in this stage may be called "bicultural"



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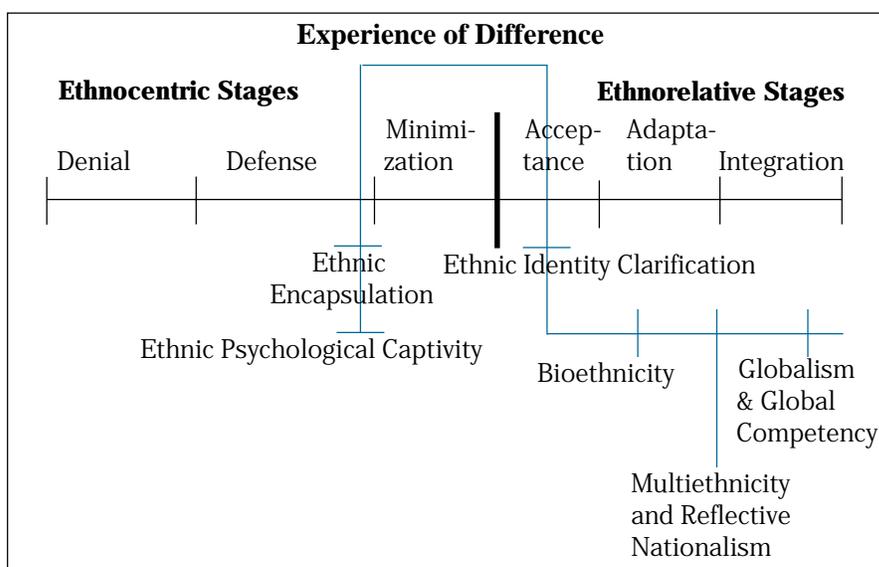
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or "multicultural." It should be noted that some people can shift frames of reference but still hold an ethnocentric view. *Strategies*: Provide opportunities for people to practice their new ability in face-to-face interaction. Activities might include a task for partners from two different cultures, or a problem-solving session for a multicultural group. Activities should be related to real-life communication situations.

Integration. Examples: "Sometimes I don't feel like I fit in anywhere." "I feel most comfortable when I am bridging differences between cultures." These two statements represent ways that people in the Integration Stage can handle multicultural identity issues. Some people become so aware of the multiplicity of cultural ways they no longer can identify with any, and they feel disturbed. Others at this stage readily adapt. *Strategies*: Establishing one's own "cultural core" or personal value system is a key step here. Some people choose to become "mediators;" they assume roles that help two cultures understand each other. As with all the Ethnorelative Stages, Integration requires thought and effort.

This article is based on the article "A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity" by Milton J. Bennett, in the "International Journal of Intercultural Relations," Vol. 10, 179-196, 1986.



Bank's model of the development of ethnic identity has been mapped onto Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity model. Source: "The stages of ethnic & cultural development" in *Multicultural Education: Theory & Practice*, 2nd ed., James A. Banks, 1981.