

Intercultural Awareness 101

A Ground Floor Look at Culture and Its Meaning

By Diane Morrison

Douglas Parsons defines culture as “How we do things around here...the unwritten rules of the social game.” And it is because the rules are unwritten that intercultural dynamics in the workplace, as well as in the community, can be so difficult for both newcomers and Canadians to understand and to deal with successfully.

After spending three years in China, Parsons realized that he needed to learn the culture as much as he needed to learn the language. This experience led him to found Parsons Development in 2010, a company that develops and delivers intercultural awareness workshops and English in the workplace programs. He believes that intercultural awareness training benefits all employees on a worksite.

People new to any country have a lot of changes to deal with all at once. Parsons likens cultural values and differences to an iceberg, where only a very small portion of the whole is visible. What can be seen and heard about a culture are things such as food, music, art, dress, holidays.

What lurks under the water, he said, are behaviours that are less easily understood, or even recognized, such as methods of communication, beliefs about hierarchy, leadership, time, individualism versus collectivism. These are the issues that can cause difficulties when they are not understood and not dealt with.

“Intercultural awareness is a science,” he said. “When we orient newcomers to the workplace, we need to be dealing with the specifics of the job and work-related values and cultural values as well.”

Stereotypes are often based on observable tendencies, he said, those things that we can see and hear such as the way someone dresses or what they eat. But where we can create shared meaning and more effective relationships, and where intercultural dynamics are often problematic, are around those aspects of our culture such as our concept of time, perceptions of self, showing emotions, waiting for service, how we gather socially.

Understanding cultural differences in the workplace is particularly important in Alberta. In 2009, there were 199,000 foreign workers in Canada. One-third of them lived in Alberta and 25,000 of these workers lived outside the province’s six major centres in rural communities. As the economy picks up, the numbers will increase.

“Companies and organizations in rural Alberta are employing more citizens who were born outside of Canada,” Parsons said. “Many people new to Canada are moving into rural Alberta for the employment opportunities and for the lifestyle advantages. Intercultural awareness training provides tools for success for multicultural teams.”

One of the tools Parsons uses in his work is the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), an assessment tool allowing individuals and teams to assess and reflect on cultural awareness and sensitivity. The IDI is used in intercultural education and training to explain the reactions of people to cultural differences. “It is a way to celebrate diversity and make it work for you,” Parsons said.

More information is available at www.parsonsdevelopment.ca.