

# What's your cultural intelligence quotient?

Creating an environment that welcomes and is open to other cultures actually helps boost farm performance

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS

**A**long with the country overall, our rural communities are becoming much more culturally diverse. The evidence is that this is a good thing for agriculture.

Research shows that diversity enhances innovation in the workplace. As well, agriculture relies on newcomers to fill the growing demand for workers in the industry.

However, diversity in the workplace also poses some challenges, including communication barriers, cultural differences, and perhaps most worrisome of all, our own personal biases.

Any of these can lead to misunderstandings and conflict, says Dr. Sara Mann, a professor in strategic HR management at the University of Guelph.

Interacting with people from different cultures requires what the experts call “cultural intelligence,” which Mann defines as the ability to interpret and adapt to others’ behaviour.

The good news, says Mann, is that we can learn to get better at it.

First of all, let’s understand what we mean by culture, which includes the values, norms, beliefs, and customs that an individual holds in common with a group.

There is even a “culture of agriculture,” which can sometimes include a tendency to knock those who don’t farm. We do the industry a disservice, however, when we refer to people as “city slickers” or “citiots,” especially considering these are the same people whom we want to buy our products.

Mann says the first step is to become more aware of our biases. Then we should try to look at the situation through the other’s perspective.

Evelina Silveira, owner of Diversity at Work in London, Ont., which offers training and publishes *Diversity and Workplace* magazine, explains how different cultural norms can interfere with effective communication. While language barriers may be one cause of misunderstandings between those of different ethnic backgrounds, less

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## Practical tips for an inclusive workplace

(Source: Evelina Silveira, publisher of *Diversity and Workplace* magazine)

Some employers may not be aware of the difference between equality and equity. For example, equality is giving everyone Sunday off as their day of rest. But if someone practices a religion that has Saturday as its day of observance, then giving that person Saturday off would be more equitable.

When planning events, be aware of restrictions around what foods may be eaten, whether alcohol is permitted, and the roles of men and women.

If there are language barriers, choose simpler explanations and use pictures or hands-on demonstrations to make it easier for workers to understand what needs to be done.

Too often we are careless with how we say people’s names. A person’s name is their identity and we should be respectful. Write the names down phonetically to help you remember how to say them correctly. Don’t laugh if you are having trouble pronouncing

it, and don’t anglicize the person’s name or call them a nickname without their permission.

Canadians tend to be more casual when it comes to names. In high context cultures, hierarchy and following formal protocols are more important. Don’t use the person’s first name until they tell you to do so. In the meantime, use the polite titles of Mr. or Mrs.

Avoid making generalizations about a person’s culture. For example, if someone is from Romania, don’t say you have a friend from Poland. “It’s not the same thing,” says Silveira. “That’s like someone telling you that they have a friend who is American.”

Don’t assume that you know everything about the area where a person comes from. Our news reports likely don’t tell the whole story.

Also respect a person’s cultural norms. “Customs bring continuity when everything is new for an immigrant,” says Silveira. “It helps to hang on to something familiar.”

obvious but perhaps even more important are differences in how we communicate.

Silveira explains that while North Americans and Northern Europeans commonly speak in a very direct and open manner, the other 80 per cent of the world may actually find this manner of speaking rude.

“We may believe our way is better, but it is important to understand that these are just different styles,” says Silveira, adding that you may confuse the speaker if you interrupt a high-context speaker and ask them to get to the point.

Leadership styles also vary between cultures. “Much of the world is used to a more

authoritarian or hierarchal leadership style,” says Silveira. Workers may have been closely supervised and may not have been allowed to be innovative, she explains, so it may take workers some time before they are comfortable with being left on their own to do work.

It isn’t that they can’t do the work that you are assigning to them. It’s that they are uncertain about what’s expected of them, and what they’re allowed to do.

It’s another example of why, when it comes to fostering a workplace where diversity is respected, leadership is important, says Silveira. There must be the same expectations for everyone from the top down, she says.

Importantly, she adds, “It must be clear that bullying and harassment will not be tolerated.”

“There must be clear communication from the top down and sideways,” agrees Lew Bayer, a Winnipeg-based corporate civility trainer.

Creating a culture of civility in the workplace is worth the effort, Bayer says. Research shows profits are 30 per cent higher, employees are 30 per cent more engaged and there is a 30 per cent increase in employee retention in these workforces.

“When understood and effectively harnessed, diversity enables us to work toward



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common goals and contributes to growth and innovation,” says Bayer. “By building our cultural competence, we can bridge cultural challenges and learn to better understand ourselves and others, to prevent and rectify misunderstandings, and to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries.”

Striving to create a more inclusive workplace also has spinoff benefits for families and communities, since employees take these good habits out into the world with them.

“Incivility happens as a result of habit,” says Bayer. “When you teach civility, people start to think differently. They will understand reciprocity, respect, team orientation and problem solving. They will become more engaged.” **CG**

## RESOURCES

The Winnipeg-based Civility Experts offers training in culture, diversity, generational or gender differences. You'll also find the free Cultural Compass Assessment Tool to help you determine where your farm business needs to improve.  
[www.civilityexperts.com/](http://www.civilityexperts.com/)

Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council offers some workshops and online training.  
[www.cahrc-ccrha.ca/](http://www.cahrc-ccrha.ca/)

Diversity at Work — training, consultation, books and newsletters on fostering inclusivity in the workplace and serving diverse clients.  
[www.yourdiversityatwork.com/](http://www.yourdiversityatwork.com/)



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