

## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

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An ever increasing consensus suggests that the field of international diplomacy is becoming more complicated due to many factors, including the pressures of globalisation, the threat of terrorism, and the technological revolution. That international diplomats and others managing and working on international projects need to become more knowledgeable and skilled in the art of working across cultures is a given. We believe that Jonas Stier echoes the conviction and wish of the world community when he writes that “It seems inevitable that future generations, in order to function in a global world, will see the value of intercultural competencies and be more prone to seek knowledge and experiences outside their home country.”<sup>1</sup> However, two key questions remain to be answered. First, what do we know about what it takes to be interculturally competent? And second, what can we do to better enable individuals and organisations to become interculturally competent? This paper, organised into three sections, will attempt to answer these two questions. The first part will present some of the key research findings on expatriate intercultural competence, derived primarily from the extensive study of professionals working in international development, business, and peacekeeping. In the second part, we will discuss the relevance of these research findings for those working in the field of international diplomacy. Finally, the third part will describe a major project undertaken by the Centre for Intercultural Learning (CIL) aimed at establishing clear and measurable indicators of intercultural competence, the results of which were to become the foundation for a new approach for the selection, training, and evaluation of international personnel.

### **Research on Expatriate Intercultural Competence: Key Findings**

Much research on intercultural competence derives from the study of sojourners, people who go to live and work in another culture on a temporary basis but often for an extended period of time. Sojourner groups include business personnel, military personnel, foreign students, international development advisors, diplomats, emergency relief workers and international peacekeepers. Professionally, the authors have had extensive experience studying the experience of sojourners and developing standards for the selection, training, and evalu-

ation of international personnel. What follows is a review of some of the key research findings on intercultural competence derived primarily from over two decades of work by Kealey and colleagues. It should be noted, however, that many of the findings reported have indeed been replicated in research undertaken by others in the same period.

### *A Definition of Expatriate Intercultural Competence*

Two major challenges confront all people making an international transition. The first challenge has to do with the person's capacity to become well-adjusted and personally satisfied in the new culture. The second challenge has to do with the person's potential to function and work effectively in the new environment. Accordingly, by our definition, an interculturally competent person is someone who is able to live contentedly and work successfully in another culture.<sup>2</sup> Further, our research<sup>3</sup> has found that what predicts the ability to live contentedly in a new culture often differs from what is needed to achieve professional success. For example, we have often found in our work assessing candidates for international assignments that an individual or couple might possess the emotional readiness and personal skills needed to adapt to the new environment, yet lack other skills (such as relationship building, social and cultural insight) needed to work effectively in the new culture. The reverse also occurs commonly.

### *Effectiveness versus Satisfaction*

In a study of Canadian development advisors<sup>4</sup> it was determined that only 20% of advisors were rated by colleagues and supervisors as highly effective at their jobs whereas over 75% reported a high level of personal satisfaction on their foreign assignment. These findings are in keeping with the results of other research on international business personnel. One explanation for this finding is that expatriates derive their satisfaction from "living the foreign lifestyle" (enjoying frequent socialising with other expatriates, having servants, etc.) rather than from meeting professional challenges. In a recent study of Canadian peacekeepers<sup>5</sup> it was reported that 92% of Canadian civilian peacekeepers in Kosovo would readily undertake a second peacekeeping mission but less than a third were rated as highly effective interculturally. Interviews identified the excitement and adventure of the assignment as being particularly motivating and satisfying.

### *The Role of Previous Overseas Experience*

Kealey<sup>6</sup> also found that Canadians with previous overseas experience generally adjusted to life in a new country more quickly and easily than those on their first overseas assignment. They reported lower levels of stress than those without overseas experience, and higher levels of satisfaction.

The study found, however, that ease of adjustment is not predictive of effectiveness in transferring skills and knowledge, despite the fact that advisors with prior experience express confident expectations prior to departure and rate themselves as being highly effective once they are working overseas. When rated by their peers, counterparts, and researchers, these advisors did not rate as more effective than those without overseas experience. In fact, too much previous experience may lead to complacency, forming a barrier to establishing effective relationships with nationals.

This finding is important for its implications in the selection of candidates for overseas assignments. To date, previous experience has been an important factor in selecting people for overseas assignment. Too often, otherwise qualified people are eliminated from the selection process because they lack international experience, a fact clearly demonstrated in this study where only 35% of the sample were on their first overseas assignment. While previous experience does have some merits, its importance as a selection criterion should be tempered. Such an action would have the added benefit of enlarging the pool of talent from which to select overseas advisors.

### *Culture Shock and Effectiveness*

Many researchers<sup>7</sup> have identified a number of interpersonal skills associated with overseas effectiveness. However, Kealey<sup>8</sup> found that the presence of those skills - flexibility, respect, attentiveness, cooperation, control, and sensitivity - is also associated with greater difficulty in adjusting to a foreign culture. People who were judged by their peers to be most effective overseas were also likely to experience the greatest degree of culture shock during the transition period.

Although these findings seem counterintuitive, they are perhaps not surprising. People with well-developed interpersonal skills place a high value on the people in their lives. In moving to a foreign culture, they are cut off from their friends and family in Canada and are unknown in their new environment. They experience acculturative stress from both a sense of loss of the old and familiar and a confrontation with the new and unfamiliar. That initial sense of loss is diminished as they become settled in the new environment and establish new relationships.

These findings have important implications for the selection of overseas personnel. To date, many recruiters have stressed adaptability as a primary consideration for selection and look for an individual who will experience the least acculturative stress, that is, someone who can move to a foreign country and begin functioning immediately. Results of this study recommend against this practice as at least some of the individuals who ultimately will be most successful will also undergo severe acculturative stress. By selecting only those individuals judged as highly adaptable, recruiters of international personnel may be screening out some of the best candidates.

### *The Reality of Culture Shock and the Stages of Adaptation*

Although people may be unaware of experiencing culture shock on an international assignment, almost all sojourners experience some degree of culture shock or culture fatigue during their stay in a new culture. Research has also identified three distinct phases in the process of adaptation. An initial stage of elation is followed by a period of depression which usually gives way to renewed feelings of satisfaction. This was identified as the “U” curve theory of cross-cultural adaptation<sup>9</sup> and it still remains valid for sojourners today although the timing and severity of the down phase (the “culture shock” or “culture fatigue” stage) varies greatly depending on prior experience and pre-departure knowledge and expectations. That the experience of fatigue and stress on encountering a new culture can seriously affect performance is clear and for this reason pre-departure training sessions usually include training on how to recognise and cope with this experience.

### *The Reality of the Expatriate Ghetto*

Research on sojourners reveals the tendency of expatriates to socialise among themselves, that is, to live in an expatriate ghetto. Although this has the advantage of providing a support structure for those expatriates, it also serves as a barrier to becoming interculturally effective. The study of Canadian development advisors<sup>10</sup> determined that the 20% of advisors who were rated highly effective at their jobs tended to be more involved with the local people and the host culture and had made an effort to learn and use the local language. Interestingly, these advisors paid a price, for they tended also to be rejected by their fellow countrymen who likely were threatened by such behaviour. Torbiorn<sup>11</sup> reports a similar finding in his research on Swedish business personnel working in other cultures.

### *Hardship and Satisfaction*

Canadians posted to countries with severe living and working conditions tend to report higher levels of satisfaction than those assigned to countries of lesser hardship.<sup>12</sup> Faced with a difficult situation, people tend to bond together for mutual support. This serves to increase the morale and effectiveness of the team. It is this experience of camaraderie which returning soldiers from World War II and other military expeditions described as so personally enriching and so powerful in its effects.

### *Headquarters versus Field*

One of the recurring findings in the studies of sojourner groups<sup>13</sup> is the difficulty of communication between personnel working in the field and headquarters managers. Overall, field personnel report that they do not feel understood, supported, or trusted by headquarters' managers. They feel that managers at headquarters are out of touch with the reality of the field, make decisions and give directions that inhibit rather than enhance their effectiveness.

### *Profile of Skills for Intercultural Effectiveness*

Over the past 50 years, extensive empirical research has attempted to identify the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to live and work in another culture.<sup>14</sup> Recent research continues to replicate previous findings and thus serves to confirm the validity of a set of general traits and skills needed to be successful in another culture. Traits such as relationship building, respect, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, realistic expectations, initiative, and self-confidence, among others, are consistently identified by researchers as part of the skills profile needed for success in another culture. Building on this research, the recent work of Vulpe and colleagues<sup>15</sup> has succeeded in establishing a very detailed description of the actual behaviour of interculturally effective people. The profile of skills and knowledge identifies nine major competency areas for a person to be acknowledged as being interculturally competent. The nine competency areas are:

- adaptation skills;
- an attitude of modesty and respect;
- an understanding of the concept of culture;
- knowledge of the host country and culture;
- relationship-building;
- self-knowledge;
- intercultural communication;

- organisational skills;
- personal and professional commitment.

For each competency area, a detailed description of behavioural indicators is provided. These are the observable, concrete actions displayed by intercultural competent individuals. Accordingly, we do know a great deal about what it takes to be effective in another culture, at least in terms of the personal skills and traits associated with intercultural success.

### *The Role and Impact of Intercultural Training*

Although studies attempting to evaluate the impact of intercultural training remain inadequate for “proving” its effectiveness in equipping people with intercultural skills,<sup>16</sup> the need to prepare and assist people in being able to live and work effectively in another culture is clear. Evidence abounds with respect to the multiplicity and variety of problems which people encounter on entering a new culture. Many types of intercultural training, from the very didactic to the very experiential, have been tried over the years. The recent emphasis in cross-cultural training, and in the field of training more generally, has been to identify the behavioural competencies needed for success and to then design training programmes aimed at acquiring these skills. This new behaviour-based approach to intercultural training provides trainees with the opportunity to learn about and actually practice interacting with people from different cultures. One of the benefits of this approach is that it makes easier to measure skills acquisition and thus may permit a more scientific evaluation of the effectiveness of intercultural training programmes.

### *Monitoring and Support*

Anyone who has had responsibility for recruiting and managing expatriate personnel will readily speak to the importance of monitoring performance and providing support to employees and staff posted abroad. Too often people are sent into other cultures and left to fend for themselves. Failure rates measured by early return are estimated from 15% to 40% for American business personnel; of those who stay, less than 50% perform adequately.<sup>17</sup> Often the reason for early return has to do with family adjustment problems. In a study of Canadian technical advisors posted to Egypt,<sup>18</sup> over 90%, including spouses, identified the need for in-country support services (such as on-arrival orientation, seminars and counselling) to help them adapt and be effective while living and working in Egypt.

### *Debriefing and Re-Entry*

Although research on expatriates has found that re-entry culture shock is often more severe than the culture shock experienced in adapting to the foreign culture, few international agencies or companies offer their employees any systematic debriefing/re-entry programme on return. The opportunity to learn from the employee's intercultural experience is lost and the need to assist employees and families to re-adapt to the home culture is ignored. Returning personnel often express frustration because they feel their international experience is not exploited by their employer and the difficulty of their re-entry on themselves and their families is unacknowledged.<sup>19</sup> This is often cited as one of the reasons why many returning expatriates actually resign from the companies which sent them to work internationally.

### *The Role of Motivation, Attitudes and Expectations*

Most researchers would agree with the view that one's motivation, attitudes, and expectations are critical determinants of whether or not a person will adapt and perform effectively in a new culture. A strong professional commitment and a desire and energy to contribute to improving conditions in the host country has repeatedly been found to be associated with success in another culture. Additionally, having positive attitudes and a spirit of adventure are also predictive of personal contentment and professional success in a new culture. Ambivalence about whether or not to undertake the foreign posting or excessive fear or concern about the future are negative indicators with respect to overseas adaptation. And, finally, possessing a set of realistic expectations prior to departure has often been found to be associated with international success as it guards against becoming disappointed or even disillusioned with the process of adapting to a new culture. On this latter point, however, it is interesting to note that Kealey's research<sup>20</sup> adds an important addendum to these general findings. For example, he found an order or priority with respect to positive attitudes and realistic expectations. Although he confirmed the importance of both, positive attitudes were found to be more important than realistic expectations in predicting success in another culture. It seemed that those possessing very positive attitudes prior to departure were simply confident and determined to make the posting work. Once in the new culture, even if they were disappointed or disillusioned due to not being adequately realistic about the conditions that awaited them in the new country, they did not let their disappointment or surprise prevent them from becoming content and effective in the new culture.

### *The Experience of Spouses*

Most of the research on spouses involves the study of women who accompany their husbands and children on the overseas assignment. Although it is being becoming more common to find men who are the accompanying spouse, very little research has been conducted on their experiences. Kealey's data on spouses identifies three key problems which confront spouses. First, in comparison with their husbands, they undergo a greater degree of stress and difficulty in adjusting to the new culture. It is their responsibility to get the house in order as their husbands go off to the office. The tasks of settling in (e.g., housing, unpacking, shopping), dealing with children's adaptation problems, establishing relationships with domestic staff, loss of privacy, and adjusting to the expatriate community are often simply overwhelming. Second, spouses report feeling isolated and dependent. They miss their family and friends back home and often come to resent their financial and emotional dependence on their husbands as they try to establish a life for themselves in the new environment. Third, many spouses report difficulty and even anger at having had to put their own career on hold in order to support the career of their husband.

The research of Kealey and others<sup>21</sup> serves to illustrate the critical importance of the situation of the spouse overseas. Put simply, the capacity of the accompanying spouse to adjust to the foreign environment is at least equally important, if not more important, as the capacity for adjustment of the working spouse. With respect to the characteristics of successful spouses, Kealey identifies three key factors: initiative, an interest in culture, and a willingness to put their own career on hold. The spouses who cope best in a new culture see the posting as an opportunity to explore, learn, and develop themselves. They have come to terms with interrupting their own career and see the posting as an adventure and a break from their own job responsibilities. For spouses who do not cope well, it is most often the case that they fundamentally did not want to go overseas but felt they had no choice but to support the career opportunity of their partner.

### **Relevance of Research Findings for International Diplomats**

Although the foregoing discussion of research findings on expatriate intercultural competence derives primarily from the study of international development workers, foreign students, and international business people, many of the findings also likely hold true for foreign service personnel. Unfortunately, very little research has focused on the personal adjustment and professional effec-



tiveness of individuals and families in the diplomatic service. It may be that the traditional role of the diplomat as representing the interests of his/her own country has justified a certain distance from local culture and, therefore, less need to be interculturally competent.

However, increasing evidence shows that the role of the diplomat is changing. Joseph Nye<sup>22</sup> and others argue that traditional self-interested diplomacy is being replaced by a diplomacy of mutuality of interests. Nye points out that the end of the cold war, economic globalisation, and the technological revolution have changed diplomacy fundamentally. Accordingly, the “hard power” of military force should give way to “soft power,” such as “the capacity for effective communication and for developing and using multilateral institutions.”<sup>23</sup> Although some will argue with this position, especially given current world events, it seems that the role of the diplomat is indeed changing and becoming more demanding in terms of the personal qualities and skills needed for success. For example, an American observer<sup>24</sup> has suggested that the role of his country’s diplomats will evolve toward being “networkers,” who link up home and host country businesses, NGOs, and other organisations for mutual advantage.

More recently, Glen Fisher, after spending more than 20 years in the foreign service, concluded that his profession ignored and continues to remain ignorant of what he terms the “psychocultural dimension of international affairs.”<sup>25</sup> He argues that diplomats and others involved in international projects need new skills to be effective in their jobs. Just learning facts and the language of another culture is insufficient for effective cross-cultural collaboration. International personnel need to be interculturally competent, able to communicate, empathise with, and understand the “mindsets” of local colleagues. It is his opinion that international operations have indeed developed a greater technical “know-how” and efficiency, but continue to ignore the need to train their people in understanding and managing the psychocultural dimensions of their business.

Without focusing on the issue of intercultural competence *per se*, other writers and researchers in the field of international affairs plead for a new direction. Helena Finn argues that more than military force is needed to fight foreign extremism. She makes the point “that dialogue is essential to winning the hearts and minds of moderate elements in societies vulnerable to radicalism.”<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Robert McNamara<sup>27</sup> had already alerted the international community to this point in his retrospective on Vietnam. But McNamara went further, to deplore his nation’s continued ignorance of other cultures: “Our judgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history,

culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, in an interesting article,<sup>29</sup> Samuel Huntington issues a wake-up call for the West as he feels many are mistakenly convinced that modernisation equals Westernisation equals an eventual single, global culture. He argues very convincingly that the widespread acceptance of American food, music, and consumer goods does not at all mean that other nations are forsaking their own ways: “Drinking Coca-Cola does not make Russians think like Americans any more than eating sushi makes Americans think like Japanese.”<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, the DiploFoundation has increasingly acknowledged the changing nature of international diplomacy and is working to bring new knowledge and awareness of intercultural and other skills needed to perform effectively in the role of diplomat. It is hoped that the foregoing presentation of research findings can serve to inform current and future planning for the selection, training, and evaluation of international diplomats.

This research has enabled us to better understand the personal and professional challenges in working across cultures, identified the interpersonal and intercultural knowledge and skills needed to be successful, and enabled a number of international organisations to improve their management of international operations. More specifically, the research findings led the Centre for Intercultural Learning of the Canadian Foreign Service Institute to conduct further research related to intercultural competence with a view to redesigning its programmes in support of international selection, training and performance evaluation.

We now turn to a discussion of *A Profile of an Interculturally Effective Person*,<sup>31</sup> a project which enabled the Centre to redesign its intercultural programmes and services. The paper will conclude with a description of the new programmes and services being developed to address the need for foreign service personnel to become more interculturally competent.

## **Profile of an Interculturally Effective Person**

Prior to undertaking the exercise described here, the Centre for Intercultural Training had considered a plan to evaluate the impact of pre-departure intercultural effectiveness training on expatriate performance in the field. This study was put off, because it was felt that a clear and measurable statement of the performance expected of an interculturally effective person did not yet exist. What is it that a person does or does not do, says or does not say, that

would indicate to an observer that he or she is, in fact, interculturally effective. In other words, a proper evaluation required an elucidation of the behavioural indicators of intercultural effectiveness.

This thinking, and a review of other sources such as Kirkpatrick<sup>32</sup> and Mager,<sup>33</sup> led us to the development of a framework for selection and training design and evaluation, which we called a profile of the interculturally effective person.

This new profile presents an integrated hierarchy of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes expected of an interculturally effective person working in a foreign culture. It covers three levels of skills and knowledge, which we called major competency areas, core competencies, and behavioural indicators.

At the most general level are nine major competency areas, or the most essential qualities required of an interculturally effective person. Although a knowledge of these nine major areas is useful to organise a multitude of competencies and behavioural indicators, and to quickly assess areas of priority attention when selecting individuals for overseas assignment or for designing training programmes, their use for evaluation purposes is minimal.

The second level gets more specific and measurable. Some 30 core competencies flesh out and begin to defuzzify the aforementioned major competency areas. These core competencies serve as precise learning objectives in the design of training programmes and are used as such by trainers. But they are still not precise and observable enough for evaluation purposes.

Therefore, our ultimate level of specificity lies at the third level, that of behavioural indicators. These indicators are conceived as behaviourally defined and observable, and hence provide evaluable statements of what an interculturally effective person would actually do and say in real life.

*Table 1* provides a visual presentation of a part of the intercultural effectiveness profile. Due to space constraints, the complete sequence is given for only one of the major competency areas and its related core competencies and behavioural indicators.

Table 1: An Example of CIL's Profile of an Interculturally Effective Person (IEP)

Major Competency Area	Core Competencies	Behavioural Indicators
7: IEPs are effective intercultural communicators.	7.1: IEPs are able to convey their thoughts, opinions, and expectations in a way that is understandable yet interculturally sensitive.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.2: IEPs are not afraid to participate in the local culture and language.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.3: IEPs are able to establish shared meanings with local people so that foreigners and local people understand what is said in the same way.	<p>7.3.1: IEPs attempt to enhance communication by avoiding any stereotypical presumptions about how local people would understand what is being said.</p> <p>7.3.2: IEPs can identify both the values the foreign workers and local colleagues share and those they do not share.</p> <p>7.3.3: IEPs have effective listening skills as evidenced by, for example, being able to restate what others have said both individually or in a meeting.</p> <p>7.3.4: IEPs possess strategies for resolving an intercultural miscommunication, for example, by checking whether local colleagues have understood a point; checking that they have understood the points made by locals; or reformulating points to enhance clarity of communication.</p>
	7.4: IEPs possess sufficient local language capacity to show that they are interested in the people with whom they work and interact.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.5: IEPs have an ability to empathise with, not just understand intellectually, how the locals see the world.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.

### *The IEP Profile in Use*

The development of the competencies and indicators in our profile of an interculturally effective person has provided a common language and set of reference points or benchmarks for consistent use throughout our selection, training design, and evaluation processes. We have now developed a series of tools and procedures for the screening and selection of international personnel. This system, called the *International Personnel Assessment (IPA) Program* assesses an

individual's overall readiness and capacity to perform effectively in another culture. These instruments are designed to assist organisations in identifying the best candidates to undertake an overseas assignment. Results of the IPA programme are also useful for identifying the knowledge and skills that need to be upgraded in order to perform effectively on an international assignment.

With regard to training design, our flagship intercultural course, a three-day pre-departure course designed for professionals and their spouses undertaking an international assignment, has been revamped by using the competencies and indicators in the profile as baseline measures and constructs for conducting assessments of learning needs and articulating the baseline learning objectives. In other words, the profile provides the performance standards against which an individual trainee's current level of intercultural skills can be assessed prior to training. Identifying the gap between actual and needed skills permits a large degree of customisation. We also give a copy of the profile to all course participants as a reference for helping them to align their behaviours with the learning objectives.

The Centre has also taken the comprehensiveness, precision and behavioural observability of the competencies and indicators to construct and implement evaluation frameworks with which one can assess not only the learning that takes place in our courses, but also the extent to which this learning transfers to effective intercultural performance in an overseas assignment. Finally, the profile has proven a valuable marketing and client relations tool, permitting our potential and new clients to grasp more clearly the tangible benefits that they can expect from our intercultural learning products and services.

## Endnotes

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