Three Skills Every 21st-Century Manager Needs

This piece by Molinsky is part of three competencies that the Harvard Business Review published in the category of leadership. This is only the first part by Molinsky and his perspective on cross-cultural leadership competency.

Code Switching Between Cultures
Three “Steps” to Increase Cross-Cultural Leadership Competency

To work well with foreign colleagues, you may have to risk feeling inauthentic and incompetent. by Andrew L. Molinsky

Marco, the Italian COO of a technology company in Mumbai, can’t motivate his Indian employees. Anat, an Israeli management consultant working in the United States, struggles to give “American style” feedback. Seungwoo, the CEO of a Korean software firm with a new Shanghai office, has trouble retaining Chinese staffers. All three of these executives should be successful in their respective cross-cultural contexts. They all have what Mansour Javidan, of the Thunderbird School of Global Management, calls a “global mind-set”: They are seasoned managers who appreciate diversity and have international work experience. They also have specific cultural intelligence: Marco knows that Indian workers are accustomed to leaders who are more authoritarian than those in Italy; Anat knows that most Americans prefer criticism couched in kindness over the blunt feedback she might ordinarily give; and Seungwoo knows that Chinese bosses tend to be more paternalistic than Korean ones. These three leaders are motivated to use this knowledge; in fact, their professional success depends on it.

So what’s holding them back? I’ve spent the past 10 years studying hundreds of savvy business professionals who were thrust into unfamiliar cultures or who work with foreign colleagues, and I believe that what Marco, Anat, and Seungwoo lack is a very specific skill I call “cultural code-switching”—the ability to modify behavior in specific situations to accommodate varying cultural norms. Code-switching requires far more than the right mind-set, information, and motivation. It requires a capacity to manage the psychological challenges that arise when someone tries to translate cultural knowledge into action.

Executives often feel inauthentic when their behavior conflicts with their ingrained values and beliefs, and doubly uncomfortable when others assume that it is a true reflection of who they are. They may also feel incompetent—anxious and embarrassed about acting in a way so far outside their comfort zone. Deeper down, they may feel frustrated and angry that they had to make changes in the first place. After all, managers don’t usually have to adapt their behavior to the needs of their subordinates; most often it’s the other way around. Together, these feelings can prevent executives from making a successful code switch, thus imperiling their careers and their companies’ success.

The good news is that it’s possible to overcome this problem.

1. The first step is to diagnose the challenges you face. In Marco’s case, a deep belief in empowering subordinates was preventing him from embracing the top-down, often harsh leadership style that his Mumbai team seemed to need in order to meet deadlines. Whenever progress was so poor that he had to yell out directives, he felt guilty (“I shouldn’t treat employees this way!”) and ineffective (“I sound ridiculous!”).
2. The second step is to adapt your behavior to reduce your distress. That means making small but meaningful adjustments that are both appropriate in the new setting and true to your own values. It may mean electing behavior that blends elements of both cultures. Marco was able to find a middle ground between his participative European management style and the more authoritarian kind expected in India. He could be significantly more hands-on and assertive without yelling. Anat was able to give feedback better tailored to an American audience while retaining some of her direct, demanding Israeli style.

3. The third step is to fully appreciate the value of code-switching. One way is to focus on how the desired outcome aligns with your personal goals and values, even if the behaviors themselves do not. Marco knew that adapting his style in India would help him become a more effective global manager, which was very important to him. Seungwoo was able to ease up on his Chinese employees when he reminded himself how important the Shanghai operation was to future growth.

Another way is to view your code-switching from the perspective of the other culture, rather than exclusively through your own lens. Once Marco came to see that his employees actually valued his new management style, it became far easier to practice. Similarly, when Anat learned to appreciate the reasons for giving American-style feedback—her colleagues were hurt and demotivated by criticism delivered without praise—she could more easily change her approach.

Being culturally fluent means being able to enter a new context, master the norms, and feel comfortable doing so. In situations where executives perceive a serious threat to their competence and identity, they often show a strong psychological resistance to appropriate behavior.

Learning to be effective at cultural code-switching is the key to becoming a truly global leader.

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