



# WHAT IS CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

BY GAITI RABBANI

As our vast world shrinks into a progressively diverse global village we are, more often than not, called on to lead, work and teach in situations where there is more than one culture at play. Acquiring the knowledge and skills to manoeuvre effectively in multicultural environments is increasingly important.

This is where 'cultural intelligence' (CQ) – a 'vitaly important aptitude and skill' according to the *Harvard Business Review* – comes in.

Cultural intelligence is defined as the capability to function effectively across various cultural contexts and with people of different cultural backgrounds. In line with IQ and EQ (emotional intelligence), you can both measure and develop this capability.

## HOW WE VIEW THE WORLD

Let's for a moment take a step back and deconstruct the broad-brush meaning that has become synonymous with the word 'culture'. Culture is a filter people use to perceive and interpret the world around them. This filter is mostly subconscious.

When we speak of culture, we might think more immediately of nationality and/or ethnicity. Australia is, after all, a nation of migrants – and one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse in the world. Australians come from over 200 birthplaces and more than 75% identify with an ancestry other than Australian.

However, culture is not only about where we were born, who we were born to and which passports we carry.

In reality, we all have multiple cultural identities – such as gender, generation and language – which contribute to how each of us perceive the world and the behaviours

of others. Consider that we also have four to five generations in the workplace and over one-fifth of the Australian population speaks a language other than English at home.

## UNKNOWN BUT NOT UNUSUAL

Our expression in life, at work and at play is honed through the social norms we are exposed to in early childhood. What's naturally familiar and acceptable to us may appear strange or even unacceptable to others – and vice versa.



Once we become more aware of our cultural drivers, we can make appropriate adjustments to others who might experience the world differently. This requires intentional effort and abilities that go beyond simply being intelligent, emotionally mature and having travelled extensively. (Myth #1: 'I travel; therefore, I am culturally intelligent!')

Essentially, CQ picks up where EQ leaves off. By developing this capability, you can learn to become more aware of your assumptions and how they impact your ability to motivate, influence and connect with others of different cultural backgrounds. There's no arguing that these skills are essential in today's culturally diverse business environments. In fact, research demonstrates that CQ may easily be the single greatest difference between thriving in the 21st century world and becoming obsolete.



### THE CQ CAPABILITY SCALE

There are four key capabilities that describe cultural intelligence and how they might present on a high to low capability scale:



#### CQ DRIVE

-  + Someone with high CQ drive is energised by working with people from different cultural backgrounds which results in higher levels of confidence to address the inevitable challenges that come with cross-cultural encounters.
-  - Typically, someone with low CQ drive shows limited interest or motivation to engage across cultures.



#### CQ KNOWLEDGE

-  + Someone with high CQ knowledge has a good overall understanding of how culture influences people's behaviour. They can identify when something is indicative of culture, rather than personality.
-  - Someone with low CQ knowledge has a limited understanding of how cultures are similar or different.

#### CQ STRATEGY

-  + Someone with high CQ strategy will consciously plan before a cross-cultural encounter which results in stronger relationships and better negotiation outcomes.
-  - Most commonly, someone with low CQ strategy invests little time in planning for cross-cultural engagements.

#### CQ ACTION

-  + Someone with high CQ action has the ability to adapt when required and is driven to reflect on cross-cultural situations to improve their knowledge.
-  - Inevitably, someone with low CQ action does not adapt their behaviour when a cultural situation requires it.

As businesses strive to harness cultural diversity in teams, create inclusive environments and connect with customers across regional and international borders, developing CQ as a pathway to cross-cultural understanding and effectiveness is essential. So, from working across borders to bridging cultures at home, navigating organisational cultures to crossing generational gaps – CQ matters!



#### GAITI RABBANI

Gaiti Rabbani is the author of *Curious about Culture*, a book about cultivating cross-cultural understanding. She is a cultural intelligence specialist, an executive advisor people and culture and founder of Rabbani Collective, a company that enables businesses to harness the potential of their people. For more information about how Gaiti can help your business visit [www.rabbanicollective.com](http://www.rabbanicollective.com)

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