The Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Framework

Today many of us work with colleagues, clients and partners from different cultures, in the same office or on a video call. Good intentions are not always enough, because the same words and gestures can mean different things to different people. In 2003, the researchers Christopher Earley and Soon Ang introduced the idea of Cultural Intelligence, or CQ. CQ is the ability to work and relate well in situations where cultures meet. Unlike a fixed personality trait, it can be learned, and it is usually described through four capabilities: CQ Drive, CQ Knowledge, CQ Strategy and CQ Action.

1. CQ Drive: Motivation

CQ Drive is our interest and confidence in working across cultures. It answers a simple question: do we really want to understand people who are different from us? People with strong CQ Drive see cultural differences as something to learn from, not something to avoid. They also keep going when a situation feels confusing or uncomfortable at first. Without this motivation, knowledge and skills are rarely used.

Example: a traveller who tries the local food and learns a few words of the language enjoys the trip much more.

At work: Lina, a project manager, joins a new team spread across four countries. Instead of feeling nervous, she sets herself a goal to learn how each colleague prefers to work.

2. CQ Knowledge: Understanding Cultures

CQ Knowledge is our understanding of how cultures are similar and how they differ. It includes communication styles, attitudes to time, ways of making decisions and views of hierarchy. It also includes knowing our own culture, because our habits can look strange to others. Good knowledge helps us understand behaviour instead of judging it too quickly. However, culture only gives us a starting point, and every person is still an individual.

Example: a visitor who learns the local greeting customs before a trip avoids an awkward first meeting.

At work: Lina reads about different ways of giving feedback. She learns that some colleagues prefer direct comments, while others prefer a softer and more private approach.

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3. CQ Strategy: Planning and Checking

CQ Strategy is how we use our knowledge to plan, check and adjust. Before a meeting across cultures, we think about what might be different and how to prepare. During the meeting, we stay aware of our assumptions and notice how others react. Afterwards, we ask ourselves whether our expectations were correct and what we should change. This thinking about our own thinking is called metacognition, and it stops us from relying on stereotypes.

Example: a new neighbour notices that others remove their shoes at the door and quietly asks what is expected.

At work: before her first workshop, Lina plans pauses for questions and a written summary. Afterwards, she checks with two colleagues whether the pace worked for everyone.

4. CQ Action: Adapting Behaviour

CQ Action is our ability to adapt what we say and do when a situation calls for it. This includes our words, tone, speed of speech, gestures and even silence. Adapting does not mean losing our identity; it means choosing the behaviour that helps the relationship. We also need to know when not to adapt, because being ourselves is often enough. The goal is to be respectful and effective, not to copy others.

Example: a tour guide speaks more slowly and uses simple words when the group includes many non-native speakers.

At work: in video calls, Lina slows down, avoids local jokes and invites quieter colleagues by name. More team members now share their ideas.

Conclusion

In summary, cultural intelligence helps us turn differences into strength instead of misunderstanding. CQ Drive gives us the motivation, CQ Knowledge gives us understanding, CQ Strategy helps us plan and check, and CQ Action helps us adapt. The four capabilities work together, and a weakness in one can hold back the others. All four rest on respect: we see each person as an individual, not as a stereotype. The good news is that CQ grows with practice, curiosity and honest feedback. Every conversation with someone different from us is a chance to learn.

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