What is intercultural competence?

The topic of intercultural competence became more and more important during the past years: globalisation and worldwide contacts between companies, organizations and individuals need the ability to communicate in a successful way.

Basic needs are sensitivity and self-consciousness: the understanding of other behaviours and ways of thinking as well as the ability to express one’s own point of view in a transparent way with the aim to be understood and respected by staying flexible where this is possible, and being clear and transparent where this is necessary.

Intercultural competence is the ability for successful communication with people of other cultures. This ability can be existing already at a young age, or be developed and improved thanks to willpower and competence. The bases for a successful intercultural communication are emotional competence, together with intercultural sensitivity.

The goal of assessing intercultural competence is to find out if a person has this ability or the potential for it.

Cultures can be different not only between continents or nations, but also within the same company or even family: every human being has its own history, its own life and therefore also (in a certain extent) its own culture resp. cultural affiliation (geographical, ethnical, moral, ethical, religious, political, historical).

The Components of ICC

ICC is a complex phenomenon with multiple components. These components include:
- a variety of characteristics or traits;
- three areas or domains;
- four dimensions;
- proficiency in a second language;
- and various levels of a longitudinal and developmental process.

Characteristics or Traits - Some commonly cited traits of ICC include: flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgment, among others.

Three Areas - ICC involves ability in three areas or domains:
- the ability to establish and maintain relationships;
- the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion;
- the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of mutual interest or need.
Four Dimensions - ICC has four dimensions; these include:

- knowledge;
- (positive) attitudes;
- skills; and
- awareness.

Proficiency in Another Language – Ability to communicate in a second or foreign language is important to the development of ICC. Grappling with another language challenges how one perceives, conceptualizes, and expresses oneself; and in the process, it opens the possibility of developing alternative communication strategies on someone else's terms. This humbling process often results in transcending and transforming how one understands the world. Lack of a second language – even at a minimal level – constrains one to continue to think about the world and act within it, only in one's native system, and deprives the individual of one of the most valuable aspects of the intercultural experience.

Why intercultural competence?

Intercultural competence is needed as the basic ability for any interaction! It is not only necessary to have social skills, but also to improve the sensitivity and understanding for other values, views, ways of living and thinking, as well as being self-conscious in transferring one's own values and views in a clear, but appropriate way.

Intercultural competence helps understanding others and achieving goals.

How to assess intercultural competence?

Although its importance is more and more recognized, only few companies and organisations assess intercultural competence in a specific and structured way. Social skills are part of every assessment, but intercultural competence is mostly judged by an assessor concerning his or her subjective impression.

Intercultural competence can hardly be defined in numbers or in a percentage-profile, but many different tools allow a reliable statement:

- computer-based validity-testing by questioning
- computer-based simulation-tests
- structured biographical interviews
• simulation-games by interacting in groups and specific situations
• differentiating between respect/empathy, prejudices, frustration-tolerance and learning-/ contact-activity
• analyzing self-assurance and adaptation-tendency
• structuring mental, emotional and spiritual competence and related cross-connections

Using similar tests allows to increase the validity; using different tests allows to increase the evidency.

Intercultural competence enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds. The group may consist of two or more people including yourself. ‘Cultural’ may denote all manner of features, including the values and beliefs you have grown up with, your national, regional and local customs and, in particular, attitudes and practices that affect the way you work.

Literature:


(10) “Barriers to Communicating Across Cultures” (pp. 158-191), in Maureen Guirdham, Communicating Across Cultures. Suffolk, 1999. ISBN 0 333 75410 7

(11) “Intercultural Communication Theories” (pp. 192-236) in Maureen Guirdham, Communicating Across Cultures. Suffolk, 1999. ISBN 0 333 75410 7