

A global conversation with David Livermore

In a recent interview, we talked to Dr. David Livermore, executive director of the Global Learning Center, research fellow with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and author of *Leading With Cultural Intelligence* about marketing across cultures.

Q: You've worked across the globe, in and out of time zones, in different cultures and climates. What is it that draws you to this kind of work?

I'm fascinated by the different ways people make sense of the world and how that shapes the way they live, relate, and work. My mind becomes alive when I arrive in a new place, rich in culture completely unlike my own, and am presented with an international assignment. The creative juices start flowing, and I'm stretched to innovate beyond what happens when working at home. I love that challenge. I've learned far more about leadership, global issues, and my faith from cross-cultural experiences and work than from any graduate course I've ever taken or taught. I've also found that nothing enhances my work at home more than the work I do overseas.

Q: Are some people just naturally good at jumping on a plane and feeling adept in Sri Lanka and others not? Or is this Cultural Intelligence something you can truly learn?

It's true that cross-cultural effectiveness comes more naturally to some, but anyone can become more culturally intelligent. To rely upon natural ability alone would be like an individual with a "runner's build" jumping into a marathon without any training. The emphasis in cultural intelligence is that anyone can learn this skill set, and in testing leaders' cultural intelligence quotient (CQ) across the world, we've found a consistent set of strategies and practices that are proven to enhance anyone's CQ, regardless of natural ability.

Q: We all know that it's more common now to be asked to communicate, work or travel to far flung locales in a global economy. Do you see things moving further in that direction as the century progresses?

Absolutely; everything points toward more of a globalized, interconnected world. The distinctions between local and global are becoming more blurred everyday, which could be why 90 percent of leading executives from 68 countries name cross-cultural leadership as the top management challenge for the next century.

Q: Is leading in culturally diverse environments different than just working in them?

Definitely. Cultural intelligence is important for any professional, but it's absolutely essential for leaders. I'd go as far as saying it's impossible to be an effective leader today without some insight into how culture affects the way you do your work (e.g. managing and motivating staff, casting vision, marketing, addressing conflict, negotiating, etc.). And different cultures have preferred leadership styles. In my own leadership, I like to involve several people throughout the organization in decision-making. While this style that works well for me when working with colleagues from Germany, the same approach is incredibly disorienting to my colleagues who come from a culture like Saudi Arabia.

Q: Your book is unique in that offers a plan of action for tackling culturally diverse projects and assignments. What pushed you to move from just the dos and don'ts, to something more comprehensive and prescriptive?

One week I'm in my U.S. office meeting with visitors from Indonesia, Mexico, and Spain and the next week I'm jumping on a plane to Dubai. For the longest time, I was frustrated because I knew I shouldn't wing it when I jumped into a new cultural situation, but there just wasn't time to master all the do's and don'ts of every culture I encountered. And frankly, I watched several Americans look pretty foolish when they tried too hard to follow the "do's and taboos" they learned in some books. I saw the value of gaining an overall skill set that could be applied to any cultural context through the use of the cultural intelligence model. Cultural intelligence is uniquely suited to those of us who travel widely more than deeply and for everyone working with the growing multiculturalism in their own contexts.

Q: What's the most difficult situation you've personally navigated abroad?

Like most people who travel extensively, I've had my fair share of "close calls," being duped, eating things like rats and worms, and making a complete fool out of myself. But my most difficult situations consistently revolve around brokering the interests, demands and expectations of my own company versus those of an international affiliate. And the challenge isn't always with the international affiliate, as might be expected; I once spent days trying to convince my senior leaders at home that a slower, more relationally driven process would be more profitable in the long run with our Brazilian client.

My U.S. colleagues didn't understand this initially, because they hadn't yet tapped into their cultural intelligence.

Q: You speak a bit in the book about the changing perception that most people have of Americans. Can you talk about that shift?

For several years, there was a sense that a leader from the U.S. could be welcomed anywhere in the world with our services, products, and ideas. But in recent years, there's been a change of attitudes toward the U.S. and what it means to work with us. We must change our role from superpower to more of a global broker. As we posture ourselves with a spirit of openness, collaboration and even compromise, we may regain a reputation for being a nation known for innovation as well as a place where people from any country, culture or background can converge and work together.

Q: Is there a single problem that is the biggest for most people who find themselves involved in cross-cultural work?

I'd have to say it's the tendency to rely too heavily upon our intuition and common sense. In our own cultural contexts, we intuitively use a set of social cues to lead effectively. We have a wealth of information, most of which is subconscious, which helps us interpret people's nonverbal responses, confront conflict, make a sale, etc. But those rules change once we start leading in a different cultural setting. The four-step cycle toward cultural intelligence—CQ Drive, CQ Knowledge, CQ Strategy, and CQ Action—offers a compass for navigating through this uncertain terrain.

Q: What's the most rewarding aspect of conquering a global assignment?

The world's major problems are all global in their reach—environmental degradation, economic sustainability, poverty, terrorism, etc. Business leaders can either perpetuate these problems with ethnocentric and imposing business practices, or they can be catalysts for solving the problems through international cooperation and sustainable development. Global assignments done with cultural intelligence provides the chance not only for personal development, but also to finding a solution to some of the greatest challenges in the world.