

# Cultural Intelligence as Managerial Competence

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## **Abstract**

In multi-cultural work settings, confusion, misunderstandings, embarrassment, a sense of being insulted, or a breakdown in relationships often occur, resulting in workplace problems. This happens especially when employees do not possess Cultural Intelligence, an emergent competence for successful management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Extensive exposure to another culture may lead to a deeper understanding of that culture's values and norms. Given South Africa's demographic profile and multi-cultural work environment, South African managers can be assumed to have a higher Cultural Intelligence because they have been exposed to multiple cultures for decades. Against this background the question arises: What is managerial Cultural Intelligence? Is it more than being exposed to another culture? If so, what should managers do to enhance their Cultural Intelligence competence in the multi-cultural work environment?

The purpose of this paper is to describe Cultural Intelligence as an important managerial competence, and provide guidelines for South African managers working in multi-cultural and multi-national organisations or work settings to develop their Cultural Intelligence.

A purposive sample group of 353 South African managers participated in this quantitative and qualitative study, using a Cultural Intelligence questionnaire developed by Du Plessis, Van den Bergh and O'Neil (2007) and six open-ended questions reflecting on Cultural Intelligence in practice. The results indicate that managerial Cultural Intelligence is a complex combination of at least three key constructs which can form the base of a managerial Cultural Intelligence competency framework: (1) understanding

cultural identity; (2) willingness to engage with and learn about other cultures; and (3) the ability to adapt to a multi-cultural setting. This framework and subsequent challenges could enable managers to use their multi-cultural opportunities fully to build their Cultural Intelligence competence, which is in demand globally.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural management, Cultural Intelligence, managerial competence, multi-cultural work environment

### **Problem Statement, Objectives and Research Questions**

Cultural Intelligence is an emerging competence and poses a challenge for successful management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Phenomena such as globalisation, expatriation and multi-national working environments compel managers to interact with multi-cultural stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, employees and communities, in order to deliver the required outputs and ensure the outcomes needed for continued business success.

An understanding of another culture is acquired from extensive and intensive experiences in that culture – it is thought that such exposure eventually leads to a deeper understanding of a culture's norms. Earley and Peterson (2004:100) report that one can obtain a reasonable cultural understanding from multiple cues picked up from observing others and their reactions. Puccino (2007:34 - 38) holds a similar view, but stipulates that exposure to the culture should usually be longer than a year to achieve this effect. The depth of a person's exposure may vary, based on the experience he or she has had in and of another culture. Research suggests that through extensive exposure to another culture a person may develop a better understanding of that culture, especially since there appears to be an ever-present relationship between cultural influence and intercultural contact (Chen & Isa 2003:75 - 96).

In South Africa, given the country's demographic profile and the increasing democratisation of the workplace since 1994, it can be assumed that managers should have a higher Cultural Intelligence, as they have been exposed to multi-cultural work settings for decades. Against this background the following research questions arise: What is managerial Cultural

Intelligence? Is it more than just being exposed to another culture, and if so, what should managers do to really engage with other cultures and enhance their Cultural Intelligence competence in a multi-cultural work environment?

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to describe managerial cultural intelligence and its importance as managerial competence, and to provide a guideline for South African managers, who as a rule work within multi-cultural and multi-national organisations or work contexts.

The significance of this paper is that it provides clarity on the construct of Cultural Intelligence for managers in an existing multi-cultural work environment and a guideline to enhance their Cultural Intelligence competence, which is a competence much sought after in a global and multi-cultural workplace. Cultural Intelligence can contribute to the strategic capability of leaders and managers and thus of the organisation. Previous research on South African leaders in general and on Cultural Intelligence has been conducted by Smit (2006) and Sauer (2008), but the current study is a pioneering paper exploring Cultural Intelligence as a *managerial construct* in the South African work environment.

## **Literature Survey**

### ***A Description of Cultural Intelligence***

Cultural Intelligence is one of the latest contributions on intelligence, finding a place alongside emotional, interpersonal and social intelligence. Interest in these so-called ‘applied’ intelligences is increasing. Studies focus on specific content domains such as ‘social intelligence’ (Thorndike & Stein 1937:275–285), ‘emotional intelligence’ (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey 2000:267–298), and ‘practical intelligence’ (Sternberg *et al.* 2000). The practical realities of globalisation and the importance of Cultural Intelligence has been acknowledged (Earley & Ang 2003) since Schmidt and Hunter’s (2000:3–14) definition of general intelligence, which implies that Cultural Intelligence is a specific form of intelligence that centres around capabilities to comprehend, reason, and behave appropriately in situations characterised by multi-cultural, or culturally diverse environments.

Cultural Intelligence can be regarded as a person’s capability to function effectively in situations characterised by cultural diversity (Van

Dyne & Ang 2005), and, in this study, specifically managers' capability to do so. Therefore, Cultural Intelligence refers to the ability to adapt effectively to new cultural settings (Ng & Earley 2006:7) and hence also to an individual's capability to cope with multi-cultural situations when engaging in cross-cultural interactions and performing in multi-cultural work groups and environments (Van Dyne & Ang 2005). Researchers of cultural intelligence seek to understand the construct of Cultural Intelligence and why some people are more effective than others when they have to adapt to new cultural settings (Ng & Earley 2006:4–19). Determining what contributes to this ability is a crucial question in understanding Cultural Intelligence and its application, which is grounded in multiple intelligence theory (Ang *et al.* 2006:100 - 123; Earley & Ang 2003).

According to the literature on Cultural Intelligence, there are various theories on the composition of the construct. Thomas and Inkson (2005:5 - 9) describe Cultural Intelligence as a construct that consists of three components which, in combination, provide a platform for intercultural flexibility and competence, namely: *knowledge* to understand cross-cultural phenomena, *mindfulness* to observe and interpret particular situations, and adapting one's *behaviour* to act appropriately in culturally different situations. These authors propose that cultural intelligence therefore includes:

- *Cognition*: thinking, learning and strategising;
- *Motivation*: efficacy and confidence, persistence, value congruence and affect for the new culture; and
- *Behaviour*: social mimicry and behavioural repertoires.

By contrast, Earley and Ang (2003), Ng and Earley (2006:4–19) and Van Dyne and Ang (2005) believe that Cultural Intelligence consists of four components:

- *Meta-cognition or Strategy*: the cognitive strategies used to acquire and develop coping strategies that enable one to adapt across cultures;
- *Cognition or Knowledge*: the knowledge one has about different cultures;

- *Motivation*: the desire one has to adapt to different cultures and the self-efficacy, or the belief that one has that one can adapt cross-culturally; and
- *Behaviour*: the repertoire one has of culturally appropriate behaviours.

The differences between these Cultural Intelligence constructs seem to be conceptual. The four-component model of Earley and Ang (2003) adds meta-cognition or strategy, which is omitted in Thomas and Inkson's (2005) three-component model. However, in the three-component model, strategising is included in the cognitive dimension.

### ***Cultural Intelligence as a Multi-dimensional Construct***

Sternberg (1986:3–15) proposes that there is an integrative framework of multiple intelligences within each person. *Meta-cognition, cognition, and motivation* are *mental or implicit* capabilities that exist in the mind, while *behavioural* capabilities refer to *explicit* actions. *Meta-cognitive intelligence* implies control of cognition: the processes people use to acquire and understand knowledge. *Cognitive intelligence* refers to knowledge structures, which argues for the importance of knowledge as part of intellect. *Motivational intelligence* refers to the mental capacity to direct and sustain energy on a particular task or situation, which implies a recognition that motivational capabilities are critical to genuine problem-solving in reality (Ceci 1996). *Behavioural intelligence* refers to noticeable signs or explicit actions: what people do, rather than what they think (Sternberg 1986:6).

The multi-dimensional construct of Cultural Intelligence recognises that the meta-cognitive component focuses on higher-order cognitive processes, whereas the cognitive component reflects a knowledge of norms, practices and conventions in different cultures acquired from education and personal experiences. This includes knowledge of the economic, legal and social systems of different cultures and subcultures (Triandis 1994) and knowledge of basic frameworks of cultural values (e.g. Hofstede 2001). Brislin, Worthley and MacNab (2006:40–55) found that people with high

cognitive Cultural Intelligence have a better comprehension of similarities and differences across cultures.

People with high motivational Cultural Intelligence direct attention and energy toward cross-cultural situations based on intrinsic interest (Deci & Ryan 1985) and display buoyancy in their cross-cultural effectiveness (Bandura 2002:274). Those with high behavioural Cultural Intelligence demonstrate suitable behaviours within their context, based on their broad range of verbal and non-verbal capabilities, such as exhibiting culturally appropriate words, tone, gestures and facial expressions (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Chua 1988).

Since the concept of Cultural Intelligence is grounded in the theory of multiple intelligences as discussed by Sternberg and Detterman (1986), Cultural Intelligence is seen to be similar to, yet unlike, other forms of intelligence. Cultural Intelligence is similar to emotional intelligence, because it is a set of capabilities, rather than preferred ways of behaving (Mayer *et al.* 2000:267) or just a general mental ability as described by Schmidt and Hunter (2000:5). The four different capabilities described as being part of Cultural Intelligence, namely meta-cognitive Cultural Intelligence, cognitive Cultural Intelligence, motivational Cultural Intelligence and behavioural Cultural Intelligence, are different capabilities that together make up total Cultural Intelligence. All these capabilities are regarded as important for managers who have to meet organisational objectives by harnessing the efforts of people from multiple cultural backgrounds.

Du Plessis, Van den Bergh and O'Neil (2007) explored the multi-dimensional construct, three-component view of Cultural Intelligence empirically amongst managers in the South African environment, as depicted in Figure 1. They found that South African managers' view of Cultural Intelligence fits into the same basic construct as that described by Earley and Ang (2003); Tan (2004:19–21) and Van Dyne and Ang (2005).

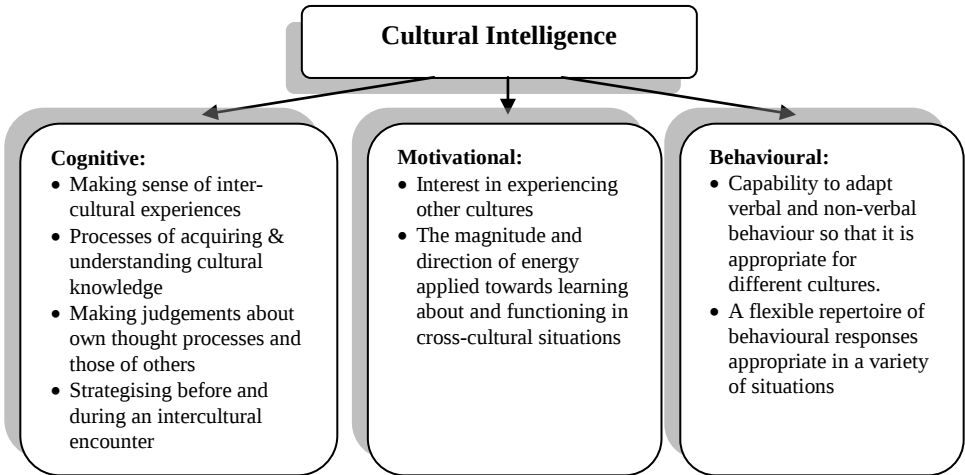


Figure 1: Cultural Intelligence model (adapted by Du Plessis *et al.* 2007 from Earley & Ang 2003; Tan 2004:19–21; Van Dyne & Ang 2005)

### ***Cultural Intelligence of Managers***

Since the components of Cultural Intelligence are embedded in managers' understanding, perceptions of value, and actions, according to Du Plessis *et al.* (2007) it is appropriate to consider Cultural Intelligence in the context of a definition of 'culture'. Culture is an elusive concept, as the term can be looked at from various scholarly perspectives. Earley, Ang and Tan (2006:20) define culture as 'the patterned ways in which people think, feel and react to various situations and actions which are acquired and shared among people through the use of symbols and artefacts'. The scholarly definition of Gollnick and Chinn (1994:94) is a more fitting definition for the purposes of this paper: 'Culture is a way of perceiving, believing, evaluating, and behaving. It is: shared, adapted, and constantly changing. A person's cultural identity is based on traits and values that are learned as part of our ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, socio-economic level, primary language, geographical region, place of residence, and disabilities.'

A further simplistic description of cultural elements, within the complex construct of culture, suggests that the concept can be divided into

‘surface’ culture and ‘deeper’ culture (Weaver 1986). Surface culture refers to those elements that can be observed and are obvious, such as language, art, food or festivals. Elements of deep culture deal with the values, feelings and attitudes that we learn by being a true member of a particular cultural grouping. It involves the thoughts and beliefs, the personal values, and the subtle nuances of interpersonal relationships as expressed in actions and words as they are lived daily. Cultural Intelligence, including both the surface and deeper cultural elements, is a pivotal managerial competence in a multi-cultural work environment such as South Africa (Sauer 2008; Smit 2007). Hence, managers have to understand and embrace both the ‘surface’ and ‘deeper’ cultural aspects. An assumption made in this study is that many South African managers have possibly touched on the surface cultural elements, but may still need to embrace the deeper aspects of culture to realise their total potential Cultural Intelligence fully.

### ***The Importance of Cultural Intelligence to Managers***

Today’s global economy makes the need for intercultural understanding, relationship building and development obvious (Earley & Peterson 2004: 100). It is common for a manager to work in a multinational organisation, or frequently to shift between countries or provinces. Cultural Intelligence increases effective management in a multicultural context and therefore in a global context. As Thomas and Inkson (2005:5) explain, ‘the need for effective interactions with people from different cultures is no longer limited to expatriates or jet-setting corporate trouble-shooters’ – it is a competency for all managers. For South African managers, this is especially important, as the work environment is inevitably multi-cultural already; and this multiplicity is even more complex in a global setting.

Cultural Intelligence requires being skilled and open about understanding a culture, learning more about it from one’s interaction with cultures, and gradually reshaping one’s thinking to be more empathetic to the different cultures one encounters and adjusting one’s behaviour to be more skilful and behave more appropriately when interacting with people from a different culture (Thomas & Inkson 2003:5–9). The business environment’s increasing diversity underpins the notion that Cultural Intelligence is a

fundamental management competence which promises a competitive advantage to organisations that possess this talent (Tan 2004:21).

Numerous authors have identified the need for and advantages attached to cultural intelligence (Brislin *et al.* 2006:40-55; Tan 2004:19-21; Van Dyne & Ang 2005). Cultural Intelligence is said to increase the effectiveness of global projects and diverse work assignments (Earley & Ang 2003). It has been found that Cultural Intelligence is an important and advantageous capability for the employee, manager and organisation (Van Dyne & Ang 2005). A person with high Cultural Intelligence is able to understand human behaviour better and is therefore in a better position to lead people in a manner that is likely to enhance business success. Higher Cultural Intelligence levels bring about effective communication within the work environment, good cultural judgement and informed decision-making. A person with high Cultural Intelligence is also better adjusted in culturally diverse situations, which in turn increase his or her effectiveness in the workplace. People who have the capability to make sense of intercultural experiences perform at higher levels in multicultural work settings. Those who have the capability to adapt their verbal and non-verbal behaviour to fit a specific cultural setting have a flexible repertoire of behavioural responses that enhance their task performance in culturally diverse settings (Van Dyne & Ang 2005).

It is therefore anticipated that a work group, such as a project team, comprised of individuals with high Cultural Intelligence would be more cohesive and collective in their performance, which would in turn increase efficiency and effectiveness (Janssens & Brett 2006:152). Trust also increases with effectiveness and vice versa, since there is a positive correlation between trust and effectiveness (Costa 2003: 620). Cultural Intelligence can thus contribute to the strategic capability of leaders and managers, and therefore, that of the organisation as a whole.

## **Research Methodology**

The methodology applied in this study was quantitative and qualitative. A Cultural Intelligence literature review and a managerial Cultural Intelligence survey questionnaire developed by Du Plessis, Van den Bergh and O'Neil (2007), adapted from Earley and Ang (2003), Tan (2004) and Van Dyne and Ang (2005), as well as six open-ended questions were used to elicit

responses to find answers to the following research questions: What is managerial Cultural Intelligence? Is it more than just being exposed to another culture? If so, what should managers do to really engage and enhance their Cultural Intelligence competence in a multi-cultural work environment?

### **Data Collection**

The quantitative part of the survey questionnaire had 24-items on Cultural Intelligence, anchored in a five-point Likert scale, ranging from ‘Never’, ‘Seldom’, ‘Often’ and ‘Always’ to ‘Unsure’. As the quantitative part of the study only reflects a small part of the study for the purposes of this paper, it is not elaborated on here.

The qualitative part consisted of six open-ended questions to explore and gather descriptive information on managers’ perceptions of Cultural Intelligence and their understanding and experiences thereof in South Africa, reflecting on the *cognitive*, *motivational* and *behavioural* components of Cultural Intelligence, and their reaction to critical incidents relating to cross-cultural interaction.

This questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of 500 South African managers operating in multi-cultural work environments. The response rate was 70.6%. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously in hard copy and their informed consent was given for their participation and the use of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data were analysed by means of descriptive analysis and exploratory factor analysis (see Du Plessis, Van den Bergh & O’Neil 2007). The responses on the qualitative data (open questions) were analysed by means of content analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of managers in the sample**

|                                    |                                              |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Age group:</b>                  | Majority between 26-45 years                 |
| <b>Managerial work experience:</b> | Majority between 2-10 years                  |
| <b>Qualification:</b>              | More than 75% had post-school qualifications |

|                          |                                                                   |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Managerial level:</b> | 45% senior management<br>37% middle management<br>18% supervisory |
| <b>Grouping:</b>         | 58% black and 42% white                                           |
| <b>Gender:</b>           | 64% female and 36% male                                           |

Final factor rotations led to a re-evaluation of the questionnaire and the scales that were developed, resulting in the following constructs that were to be measured for managerial Cultural Intelligence:

- Factor 1: *Cultural Identity* – relates to the cognitive component of Cultural Intelligence;
- Factor 2: *Adaptability to a multi-cultural setting* – relates to the behavioural component of Cultural Intelligence; and
- Factor 3: *Willingness to learn about different cultures* – relates to the motivational component of Cultural Intelligence.

The factor scale's reliability was relatively high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75. Two of the factors underlying the construct also had a high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.746 for Factor 1 and a slightly lower Cronbach's alpha of 0.640 for Factor 2. Factor 3, however, yielded a Cronbach's alpha of only 0.407 and could therefore be eliminated from the scale.

## Discussion of Results and Findings

The *quantitative results* of this study indicate that managerial Cultural Intelligence does not involve only exposure to other cultures, but includes a complex combination of at least three key constructs, as depicted in Figure 1. The three constructs have been renamed: (1) understanding cultural identity (knowledge component); (2) the ability to adapt to a multi-cultural setting (behavioural component); and (3) willingness to engage and learn about other cultures (motivational component). These three constructs form the basis of a managerial Cultural Intelligence competency framework, as indicated in Figure 2.

For Factor 1, *Cultural Identity*, a statistically significant difference was found between age groups. The age groups younger than 45 years, who

entered the workplace or built up most of their experience during the 16 years of democracy since 1994 had a better self-identity when interacting or having to interact in a multi-cultural work setting. They have probably developed a better understanding of multiple cultures in the workplace than the older group, who may have become more set in their work ways and were used to doing things their way. This finding corresponds with that reported by Sauer (2008), who found that age and work experience had an impact on the Cultural Intelligence of South African leaders in general; and that younger black South African leaders showed a higher Cultural Intelligence than the older white South African group.

For Factor 2, *Adaptability to a multi-cultural situation*, a statistically significant difference was found between male and female managers, in terms of years of experience and managerial level. In general, female managers displayed a greater ability to adapt and accept other cultures. Years of managerial work experience in a multi-cultural society also signified easier adaptability. This finding is self-explanatory, as experience supports better adjustment and acculturation.

For Factor 3, *Willingness to learn about culture*, showed no significant difference in the sample group. The reliability of this factor scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.407, also indicates that managerial willingness to engage with other cultures is not being perceived by South African managers as a relevant construct to include. Speculation about this finding is that willingness to learn about other cultures may be viewed as a given. It could also be viewed as not significant because managers fear that they are seen as not being willing to engage, which is not an acceptable behaviour in the South African environment. They might also be really willing to engage and learn and therefore this factor shows no significant differences in the sample group.

The *qualitative analysis* was based on six open-ended questions, focusing on the managers' perception of Cultural Intelligence, as well as their reaction to critical incidents of cross-cultural interaction. It revealed the following in response to the six questions:

- 1. Question 1: *An employee from another culture invites you for dinner and you know that the food may be different to what you are used to. What will you do?***

Most respondents indicated that they would accept the invitation. From those

who indicated acceptance, most indicated that if the food seemed unfamiliar, they would *'give the food a try'*. Other responses from those who accepted the invitation were *'eat only certain foods'*, *'inform host of dietary requirements'*, and *'seek guidance from someone that understands the culture, before going'*.

**2. Question 2: *What was your most exhilarating moment in having to deal with people from different cultures?***

The different positive experiences listed included work-related experiences, such as *'team building'* and *'travelling'*, education-related experiences, such as *'cultural events'*, *'intercultural training'* and *'being students – studying together'*; the understanding of intercultural differences and similarities by *'open communication and sharing'* and specific interactions with different cultures, especially *'after the 1994 elections, such as sport events'*.

**3. Question 3: *My most embarrassing moment in having to deal with people from a different culture was ...?***

The majority of responses on embarrassing moments were *'deeper cultural misunderstandings'*, such as making inappropriate assumptions, inappropriate greetings, inappropriate gestures, comments or actions, insensitivity, lack of knowledge or understanding and language barriers.

**4. Question 4: *What are your goals as a manager/supervisor when specifically dealing with a multicultural group?***

The majority of managers responded that they would,

- try to foster a *'Cross-Cultural Understanding'* by means of knowledge-sharing, seeking to understand differences and recognising similarities, maximising potential and respecting differences by understanding each other; and
- try to meet *'Organisational Objectives'* by managing diversity, communication with understanding, equal/ fair treatment, achieving results irrespective of various cultures (*'getting the job done'*).

**5. Question 5: *Are you actively trying to learn about other cultures? If yes, how?***

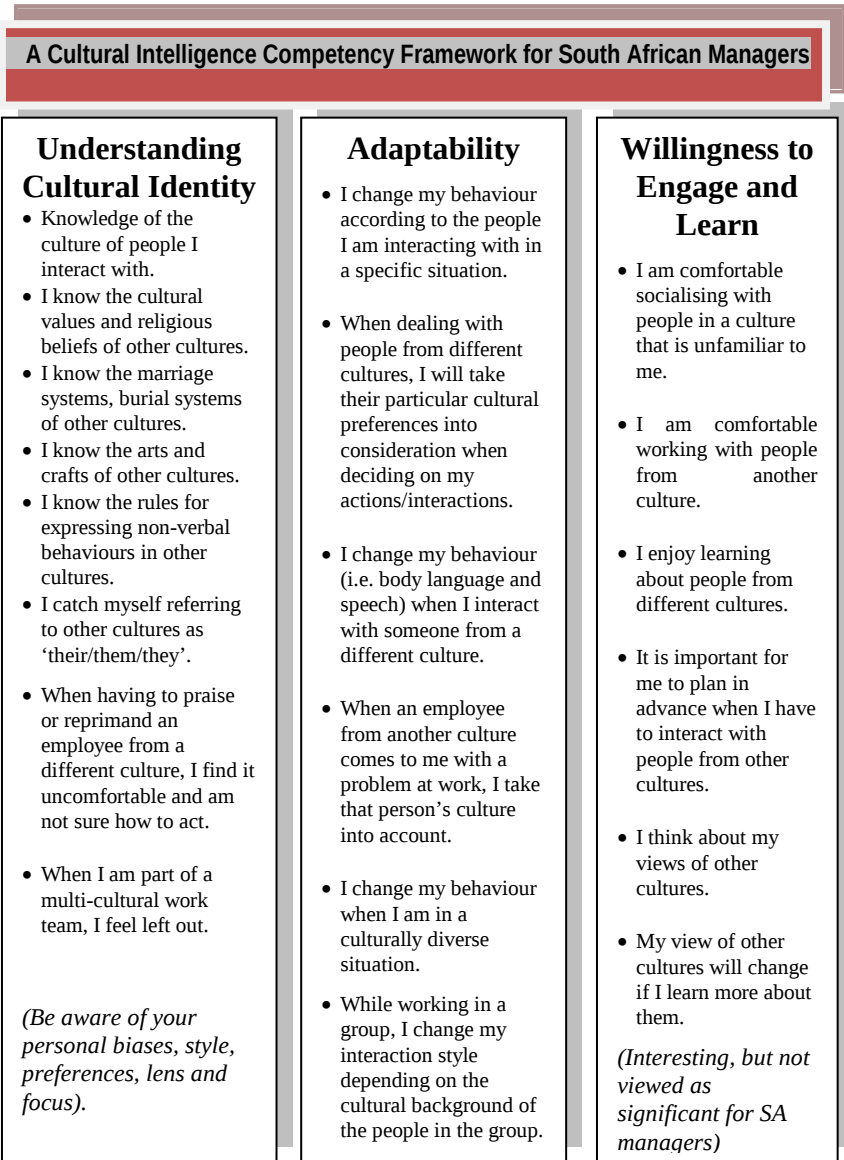
More than 70% of managers indicated that they are consciously trying to learn about other cultures. The means of learning mentioned were:

- ‘*direct interactions with people from different culture*’ by participating in cultural events, ceremonies and rituals (weddings, funerals, etc.), travelling, social interactions and asking questions about the culture(s) different from the respondents’ own; and
- ‘*active learning methods*’ such as reading, attendance at workshops, forums or training, exposure via the media (television/ radio/ audio-visual aids/ Internet learning) and learning a new language.

**6. Question 6: *In having to deal with people from different cultures, I would like to have answers on the following:***

The majority of responses were related to ‘*understanding the social conduct and what is appropriate behaviour*’ such as ‘*forbidden /offensive behaviour*’, ‘*showing respect*’ and ‘*earning trust*’. Answers to these needs lie in deeper engagement with other cultures and direct and open communication with each other in seeking answers.

A summary of the competencies and elements that South African managers regarded as being important in building managerial cultural intelligence is set out in a framework (Figure 2). This framework and subsequent challenges could enable managers to use the existing multi-cultural opportunities fully and to build their Cultural Intelligence competence. The framework serves as a self- managed checklist with questions that managers can utilise to consciously check their competence against or in a managerial training session to create awareness of constructs and to develop actions plans enabling them to build their competence. South African managers indicated that they are eager to learn about other cultures; moreover, they express the need to engage in the ‘deeper’ cultural components. They appear to regard opportunities for multi-cultural learning as a valuable contribution to interpersonal relationship-building and organisational improvement.



**Figure 2: Framework of Cultural Intelligence Competencies for South African Managers**

## **Conclusion**

Cultural Intelligence and its importance as a managerial competence cannot be denied. South African managers are of the opinion that they can improve their Cultural Intelligence competence. The two main dimensions of competence building for South African managers, who have been working in multi-cultural work settings for decades are ‘understanding cultural identity’ of people in the work environment and ‘being able to adapt’ and engage with people from different cultures. The guideline of components within the Cultural Intelligence constructs that were developed is by no means exhaustive, but could enable managers to use their existing opportunities fully within multi-cultural environments to build their Cultural Intelligence competence, which is sought after locally and globally.

The constant challenge for South African managers, as they indicated in this study, is not to become complacent and think that they can acquire Cultural Intelligence simply by being exposed to working with other cultures. Instead, managers should consciously create, seek and make use of opportunities to engage with the ‘deeper’ elements of other cultures and learn from this engagement. This should enable better relationships and facilitate organisational performance. Further research is needed on how managerial Cultural Intelligence can improve workplace performance, especially in understanding cultural identity and adaptation in multi-cultural environments in different organisational contexts. Some detailed case studies on how managerial Cultural Intelligence is applied and being useful in the workplace are needed.

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