Dr. Milton Bennett expands the use of his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivty

By Indra Lahiri

How can we, as diversity practitioners, help employees in our organizations succeed in an increasingly complex workplace? Our function is to clarify what cultural competence is and why it is needed, and to help employees enhance understanding of their own culture, and increase their intercultural sensitivity and competence. Dr. Milton Bennett of the Portland-based Intercultural Communication Institute has developed tools to help managers and employees rise to these challenges.

In 1986, Bennett created the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (See "Experience of Difference"), which shows a progression of stages people may go through in developing intercultural competency. Since then, he has partnered with Dr. Mitch Hammer of American University to develop the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The inventory is a set of statements that allows an individual to assess his/her developmental stage of intercultural sensitivity according to the DMIS. This tool is valuable because it measures people's ability to experience difference in relatively complex ways.

Tool to understand resistance

Development of intercultural competence does not come without a struggle; some employees will protest these efforts. Bennett's model helps us understand that the basic form of resistance is a defense response. People who respond to diversity efforts in this way are often moving from the model's first stage of intercultural sensitivity, denial (a failure to recognize that cultural differences exist) into the second stage, defense (recognition of differences). Often, people at this stage may express concern about reverse

discrimination. "Recognition of the fact that differences do exist carries a threat," he says. The reaction is to defend one's self. Bennett recommends listening carefully to the person's fears and to help them understand how the organization will continue to extend opportunities to this person's cultural group, even as efforts expand to include other cultural groups.

The model predicts that as time goes by, people can move from defense (stage two) into minimization (stage three). "With minimization, there's more recognition that we're dealing with people that are different, but there's still resistance to that idea," Bennett explains. "The belief is that somehow if we are more open in making sure that equal opportunity exists, everyone should be grateful and follow a set of rules." Someone in this stage may say, "Why can't we all just be Americans?" A person at this stage hopes that we will all converge into a single cultural position. Of course, this position assumes people are able and willing to shed their culture and take on American culture.

"The intervention required here is much more subtle," says Bennett. He explains that the key is getting people to become more culturally aware of themselves. "We can't hammer on prejudice with people at this stage. They don't think they are prejudiced. They simply do not understand the way in which their unconscious imperialism is oppressing others in the organization." Bennett says the prevalence of people in this stage demands that diversity practitioners be more clever in creating awareness that each person is equal culturally to everyone else. He adds that at this stage, people cannot see how their own values, beliefs and behaviors are culturally based.

Addressing backlash

Bennett recommends several approaches to addressing backlash:

Cultural Self-Awareness: Help employees develop cultural awareness, including (if applicable) identification of European American ethnicity versus stopping at a more specific cultural self-awareness (such as Italian or Irish).

Recognition of Cultural Capital: Prepare employees to deal with issues of privilege in a non-threatening way. Help them to identify their own cultural capital (what it means to belong to their own group and how that translates into institutional privilege).

Establishing a Cultural Core: Facilitate an exploration of value commitment in the context of intercultural relativity. In other words, we need to recognize that our values are culturally based. Then, we must develop the capability of working effectively with people with different values without feeling the need to give up our own values system. "I find that most diversity practitioners don't have the ability to deal with this," He says. "[The tendency is to think] if there aren't any basic values, which by the way are mine, how do we work and live ethically?"

International application

Bennett envisions this model extending beyond domestic to international diversity efforts. "Global diversity is the recognition and development of skills to deal with differences on both international and domestic fronts," says Bennett.

Many organizations realize that diversity efforts involve on-going change strategies rather than one-time training events. There is also a move

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toward coupling international and domestic diversity, and aligning inter-cultural competence with leadership development. "The danger [in these trends] of course is that international issues may be seen as diffusing other important [domestic diversity] issues," Bennett cautions. Our challenge, then, is to maintain the emphasis on domes-tic issues within the context of the larger global diversity effort.

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Experience of Difference

Ethnocentric Stages			Ethnorelative Stages		
Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration