
Cultural Intelligence: Developing a Multicultural Mindset

On February 9th-11th, 2011, **Mr David Solomons**, partner at *Creative Learning Consultants*, London, delivered a short seminar within the framework of the MIREES Masters Program at the University of Bologna in Forli.

In his three day workshop on cross-cultural communication, David Solomons began with silence: for a full minute he sat at the front of the room looking out at us. No-one said anything; then he told us our first assignment was to change rooms. All of us moved next door, moving from a traditional, lecture style, seating arrangement to a round-table format. Through these first three points of the workshop, the silence, the moving of rooms and the set up of the second room, we were being introduced to some of the challenges of working in **multicultural environments**. Both the initial silence and the moving of rooms presented some confusion and challenged our expectations for the lecture. Following this introduction, in which Mr Solomons personally shook everyone's hand, we were all encourage to consider our emotional responses to what had happened so far. Responses ranged from frustration to amusement, but in all cases the events had been unexpected.



This interaction, laying bare the anxiety that can be produced by operating in cultural norms that are foreign or new to us, set the tone for the three seminars to follow. Methodologically, the emphasis was placed on **discussion and reflection** within the group. The intention of these seminars was to provide us with a set of tools through which we would be better able to manage the challenges of negotiating cultural differences. The point was, according to Solomons, not to panic, but to be able to consider why something might be happening, from **multiple perspectives**. His introduction had challenged our expectation of the open lecture format and our reactions were thus perfect examples of what occurs when the context we walk into is not familiar or what we expected. These concrete examples showed us our own unconscious level of assumptions, and how quickly that can lead to problems.

The workshop, divided into three seminars, was based on **three modules**. Each of these modules focused on an important aspect of developing an open-minded, global orientation. The first module was a role-play scenario, in which we all assumed certain roles, representing one of two cultures that were in a business negotiation. This scenario demonstrated the difficulties of important negotiations in situations where there is a lack of experience in the cultural norms between the two parties. Building on this, the next two

modules were then focused on assessing ourselves and own value system and challenging it against others. In a series of exercises we selected important values and then tried to consider them from other cultural perspectives, and developed a **“cultural matrix” visual reference** of how we perceive ourselves and how we see others (and consequently, how others perceive us).

Although we did not really have enough time to fully explore the concepts, for a group as diverse as the students of MIREES, the value of the workshop was clear: not only did it remind us that ‘multicultural’ includes *yourself* and isn’t just about everyone else, but it also focused on **self-awareness** in cultural interaction. While it is important that this awareness does not just become a system of classification, but retains an element of deconstruction, the greater awareness we gained in the workshop are relevant to a wide range on professional and personal situations.

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