

Chapter 1

Intercultural Competence

Facilitator Notes

Chapter 1 introduces intercultural competence as a critical skill for working effectively across cultural differences in professional settings. It establishes a foundation for understanding how identity, culture, and bias influence collaboration, decision making, and team dynamics.

This chapter helps participants move from awareness to action, emphasizing that inclusive behavior and systems require intentional development—not just diverse representation.

What this guide includes:

- Definition and components of intercultural competence.
- The role of culture and identity in shaping behavior.
- Common forms and impacts of implicit bias.
- Connections between bias and workplace outcomes.
- Ways to assess the degree of individual and firm competence.
- Individual and organizational actions to build competence.
- Scenarios and reflections for applied learning.

Suggested Pre-Read:

- To maximize engagement and discussion, participants should read the corresponding chapters one page, [Executive Summary](#).

Corresponding Learning Objectives

Attendees will be able to:

- Define intercultural competence and describe its key components as a foundation for effective cross-cultural collaboration.
- Explain how identity, culture, and implicit bias influence workplace behaviors, including decision making, communication, and team dynamics.
- Identify the impacts of implicit bias on individuals and organizational outcomes and consider approaches for reducing bias in professional settings.
- Apply strategies for building intercultural competence, including personal reflection, dialogue, and inclusive actions at both individual and systemic levels.

Use this outline to:

- Set the tone for honest reflection and dialogue.
- Introduce intercultural competence as a learnable behavior.
- Facilitate exploration of cultural patterns, assumptions, and blind spots.
- Encourage both personal accountability and systemic awareness and change.
- Equip participants with language and tools to take meaningful action within their teams and firms.

SLIDE 2 THE GUIDES FOR EQUITABLE PRACTICE: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

- To increase the value of diversity in our profession, we must develop inclusive, equitable workplaces in which unbiased, culturally aware thoughts and actions guide our practice.
- This guide outlines the importance of increasing intercultural competence and actively reducing bias in the U.S. architecture workplace against people with nondominant identities—such as people who are women, immigrants, people with disabilities, single, LGBTQIA+, young and old, less educated, or of certain races, ethnicities, religions, or socioeconomic classes—and recommends actions for doing so.

Notes

1. **What do you hope to get out of today?**
 2. **Why is this topic important to you or your firm?**
 3. **Set expectations for rules engagement.**
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SLIDE 3 WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE?

- *The ability of individuals and groups to deeply understand and value cultural differences and to shift or adapt thinking and behaviors to achieve shared goals. Building intercultural competence is one of the most effective ways of achieving equity goals since it helps address conscious and unconscious biases as well as individual, group, and institutional practices that are barriers to equity and inclusion.*
- To value and work across cultures you have to understand intercultural competence.
- What parts of culture are visible? What is under the surface?

Notes

1. **Introduce Cultural Iceberg visual. Emphasize every group or organization has a culture.**
 2. **Think of a culture you belong to.**
 - **What parts are explicit/visible? (e.g., food, music, family structure)**
 - **What is beneath the surface? (values, religion, gender roles)**
 3. **If you are not aware of something, then it is much more difficult to change it.**
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SLIDE 4 WHY INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE MATTERS

- Mixed groups are more productive, creative, and innovative than homogeneous groups—if they have developed the capacity to leverage what everyone has to offer.
- Diverse teams only outperform if well managed. (Poorly managed diverse teams actually perform worse than homogeneous ones. Another reason for having intercultural competence.)
- Intercultural Competence consists of both knowledge and skill that can be learned and practiced.

Notes

1. **Clarify: Diversity alone isn't enough and if a team is diverse but poorly managed, can be harmful to the organization.**
2. **Have you seen examples of diverse teams struggling or succeeding?**
 - **List behaviors or practices that helped/hindered collaboration.**

SLIDE 5 IDENTITY AND BIAS

- Identity: labels that categorize individuals' social identities, both visible and invisible, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, age, national origin, immigration status, political leanings, and socioeconomic status. Everyone has multiple identities.
- Context and situation determine some aspects of identity. Dominant identities are the ones considered to be the "norm." Nondominant are those considered "minority" or "different."
- Bias: Is typically an unfair preference for or prejudice against a person or group. Biases stem from causes such as cultural conditioning, past experiences, and media portrayals that create stereotypes, and they manifest in inequitable treatment.
- *Bias can affect how we perceive all facets of identity both favorably and negatively and can lead to inequities.*

Notes

1. **People are prone to bias. Being able to identify, notice, and manage bias is essential.**
 2. **Reflect on patterns or generalizations you can identify within your culture or community.**
 3. **Context determines how we judge—make meaning—of identity markers.**
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SLIDE 6 UNPACKING BIAS: IMPLICIT & EXPLICIT

- *Explicit bias* occurs when one is conscious of their prejudices and attitudes toward a certain group.
- *Implicit biases* are the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner, are activated involuntarily without awareness or intent, and can be either positive or negative.

Examples:

- affinity bias (favoring people like ourselves)
- confirmation bias (seeking information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions)
- halo effect (thinking everything about a person is good because you like that person)

Notes

1. **These are only a few examples of bias, see here for a wheel of 188!**
<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/every-single-cognitive-bias/>
2. **Which of these biases have you witnessed or experienced personally or professionally?**
3. **How can we reduce or limit bias?**

SLIDE 7 THE COST OF UNCHECKED BIAS

- Individual: stifled creativity, stress, reduced performance.
- Firm: high turnover, reduced talent pools.
- Profession: limited innovation, missed opportunities, systemic injustices.

Notes

1. **Highlight that unchecked bias harms everyone, not just the person on the receiving end.**
 - At the individual level, bias can stifle creativity, reduce collaboration and engagement, reinforce inequities, negatively impact performance, and cause stress.
 - At the Firm-Level, bias can reduce talent pools, result in high turnover, and negatively impact leadership succession and project teams' success.
 - The profession is limited if there is not an ability to respond to and reflect the needs of the client or community. Missing opportunities to address discrimination and remediate biased practices will perpetuate existing injustices. (More detail on this topic in Chapter 8, *Community Engagement*.)
 2. **Where in your workplace might bias be affecting outcomes?**
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SLIDE 8 WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE**Notes**

1. **Review each example of what good looks like. Make a check mark next to practices that you can find in your firm or organization, a question mark for those where you are not sure, and a minus for those that are missing.**
 2. **What areas are strong, which are you not sure about, and which areas are weak?**
 3. **Ask for volunteers to share examples.**
 4. **What can you do to influence change?**
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SLIDE 9 ACTIONS TO BUILD COMPETENCE (INDIVIDUAL LEVEL)

- Increase cultural self-awareness.
- Learn and interrupt bias (for example, use IAT or IDI).
- Build relationships across difference.
- Become aware of your organization's current cultural patterns. Actively consider multiple perspectives. For example, D.I.V.E.: *Describe* (describe what you hear or see), *Interpret* (think of several interpretations for it), *Verify* (ask others if your interpretations seem correct), *Evaluate* (evaluate interpretations according to what you and others value).

Notes

1. **Encourage personal accountability.**
2. **What is one step you will take in the next three months to grow your competence?**

SLIDE 10 ACTIONS TO BUILD COMPETENCE (FIRM-LEVEL)

- Audit systems for bias: website, policies, benefits, hiring and recognition practices.
- Review decision making processes: consider who is and who is not included.
- Cultivate and articulate a shared understanding of the organization's mission and core values.
- Develop the capacity of individual managers to listen and lead.

Notes

1. What systems could be improved in your firm to support inclusion?
 2. What is one step you will recommend to your leadership in the next three months to grow competence and reduce bias?
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SLIDE 11 CONSIDER SCENARIOS & REFLECTIONS**Notes**

1. Select a scenario from the chapter that you feel will resonate with the group. Ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Discuss the discussion prompts in small groups and share back with the full group.
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SLIDE 12 NOW WHAT?**Notes**

1. Ask everyone to review the commitments they have written so far and to strengthen their commitment and create a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)
2. Give everyone the option to share.
3. Suggest they check in with a peer or accountability partner one month later.
4. Note that there are many more ideas for action and additional scenarios in the full chapter.
5. If you have specific resources, committees, or additional worksheets, you can promote those here.