Leading in a Culturally Complex World

By Ricardo González
John Schnatter is in the fight of his life to save his very large slice of Papa John’s pizza. His use of a racial slur (albeit quoting another person to make a point) in a private corporate meeting leaked out and now has had serious repercussions for both him and the brand. Now, Papa John is actually suing Papa John’s. He even has a “Save Papa John’s” website to make his case to the general public. It includes all court documents, petitions, and news items.

Without a doubt, leaders are living in the most culturally complex time in history. The push for diversity and inclusion is at an all-time high. Years ago, the standard for leaders was to have a high intelligence quotient (IQ). Then there was an emphasis put on emotional quotient (EQ). Now, the need is to have a high cultural quotient (CQ). Indeed, today’s most successful leaders possess high IQs, EQs, and CQs.

What is your CQ? Do you possess the ability to successfully connect, create, and collaborate with people different from yourself? Do you understand what culture is and how it works? Do you know how to successfully navigate the culturally challenging scenarios that are active in our diverse world? The world in which we’re living demands that one become a master of culture.

In my book, *The 6 Stages of Cultural Mastery*, I map out a specific process by which one can move from being a cultural novice to being a cultural master. Here’s how I like to think about this: Cultural diversity is designed to get people into the game, cultural inclusion is intended to make sure everyone plays in the game, and cultural mastery ensures that everyone wins in the game together as a united team.

Leaders who develop the skills of connecting, creating, and collaborating with people of diverse cultures enjoy two primary benefits. First, they exponentially increase their influence. Second, they protect themselves and their organizations from doing and saying things that could potentially derail their careers or damage the organizational brand.

Think John Schnatter.

So, what are the six stages of cultural mastery, and how do they apply to your leadership?

1. Education
2. Engagement
3. Empathy
4. Excitement
5. Empowerment
6. Endearment

Take a look at Stage Six. It is endearment. The goal of intercultural relationships should be endearment, not tolerance. One of the reasons we are getting such poor results in our cultural training and approaches is because we have the wrong goals. Cultural tolerance is a very poor goal. Do we really want to keep gritting our teeth at one another? Wouldn’t it be better if we learned to love one another? In the business context, the concept of love is not erotic in any manner; rather it is a genuine affection and admiration for one another that leads us to sacrifice together for the common good. When all of our people, from all cultures, are genuinely endeared to one another, their ability to collaborate with one another will increase many times beyond what teams usually experience. Why is this?

It is because love is sacrificial. People are willing to put their personal agendas aside for the good of the team, and this is when the highest levels of collaboration can occur.

Let’s take a brief look at the six stages of cultural mastery.

**STAGE ONE – EDUCATION**

Simply put, we cannot lead people to the highest levels until we know them at the deepest levels. I am always amazed at how little most leaders know about their people. They don’t know them, and they certainly don’t understand their culture. I remember speaking to a group of construction owners who were employing large numbers of Mexicans. I asked them some simple questions about Mexico like, “How many states are there in Mexico?” “Who is the president of Mexico?” “What’s the name of the Mexican national soccer team?” “Who is the most famous soccer player in Mexico?” “Who is Vicente Fernández?” among others. No one had the answers. They had no idea about anything about Mexico, although many of them had been employing people from Mexico for years. If we are going to master culture, we must first learn about the people we lead.
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STAGE TWO – ENGAGEMENT

Authentic engagement is meaningful interaction with people doing things we enjoy together. It is not calling someone into our office and having a “chat” together. Unfortunately, that feels more like an inquisition most of the time. Do you engage with the people you lead outside of work? Do you do things together that are meaningful? If not, I would encourage you to do so. I am reminded of the show “Undercover Boss,” where bosses get out of their offices and work alongside their people in a clandestine manner. The people who change the most are not the employees, but rather the leaders.

STAGE THREE – EMPATHY

Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy comes from the Latin word *em pathos*, which means “in passion.” Empathy doesn’t mean I feel sorry for you; it means I am passionate about you. In this stage, we learn to fully appreciate the talents, gifts, and abilities of the people with whom we work. It is the natural outcome of proper education and engagement. Empathy is also the stage in which our negative biases become positive. There is a lot of talk about unconscious and conscious bias. Well, if my unconscious bias becomes conscious, I still have bias, and at some time for some reason, it will come out, and that’s the danger. You will remember Starbucks closing more than 8000 stores to do anti-bias training earlier this year after a store manager called police on two African-American men who were sitting in the store. The real answer to bias, however, is not a one-day anti-bias training event. That is one and done. It is working through the process of converting negative bias into positive bias. And this conversion happens when we develop a sincere passion for people different from ourselves.

STAGE FOUR – EXCITEMENT

After properly educating ourselves, engaging, and developing true empathy, we will naturally become excited about our relationship. When we are excited about a relationship, we want to work together. That’s why the excitement stage is the vision creation stage. It’s exciting! A word of caution: Most leaders want to move straight to Stage Four without going through the first three stages, and then they wonder why their visions fall apart. The reason is that they never developed meaningful relationships with their people, nor did they develop authentic understanding or empathy. It left them short, and vision-setting can’t just be the vision of the leader, it must be the vision of all people, or there won’t be a real commitment or buy-in from those we’re leading.

STAGE FIVE – EMPOWERMENT

Once we create and design a vision together, we must empower it. When we are empowering a vision with people of diverse cultures, there are considerations that must be addressed regarding fairness and justice. Many corporate leaders live by a fairness mantra; in other words, they attempt to treat all people the same. Justice, however, recognizes that different people need different types and levels of resources to achieve the same result. Fairness and equality are not justice. In fact, many times being fair with people is a detriment to the overall achievement of our corporate goals. In addition, issues of accountability need to be considered because people from different cultures respond in different ways to systems of accountability.
STAGE SIX – ENDEARMENT

We genuinely love one another. We have reached Stage Six together. We’re committed to sacrificing together for the common good, not just our own good. We can collaborate in ways that previously were not possible.

This is powerful! No longer do we have the low goal of cultural competency; we aspire to cultural mastery. No longer do we talk about cultural sensitivity; we talk about cultural skill. And no longer do we talk about cultural tolerance; we experience cultural endearment.

May I ask you a few questions? Do you profoundly know your people? Do you meaningfully engage with those under your influence? Do you feel passionate about those you lead? Are all people at the table setting vision together? Together, are you finding ways to empower your shared vision? Have you reached true endearment with those you lead? If you cannot honestly say this is the case, may I challenge you to develop the skills of a cultural master? Your level of influence and, quite possibly, your future success as a leader, depend on it.