



Career Management Column as published in Leadership and Management Books, L&MB - [Rita Balian Allen](#), Author of *Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself*

“Open Your Eyes, Ears and Your Mind...Heightening our Level of Multicultural Awareness ”

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Every professional today is required to work with a multitude of people all over the globe across different geographies and demographics ranging from peers, colleagues, staff members, managers, customers, clients, vendors, and other types of contacts. The marketplace continues to evolve in ways that necessitate our ability to embrace new perspectives, concepts, practices, motivations, cultures, and beliefs.

There is an increased level of cultural diversity and perspectives in the workplace today. Our ability to understand these differences, educate ourselves and appreciate these differences will determine our success as professionals and leaders. Building experience and comfort working with a diverse mix of individuals and situations will enable us to be more knowledgeable as well as sensitive to these multicultural needs and concerns.

In fact, international responsibilities and multicultural awareness are requirements for many positions today. Specifically for anyone in a leadership role, it is a competency that is desired and assessed in measuring their leadership capabilities. Do you look for opportunities to expand your multicultural knowledge and experience? Do you seek out assignments, projects and/or roles that allow you to be exposed to different environments outside your own cultural and national boundaries?

Multiculturalism can be defined as creating interdependence and interrelatedness, building a peaceful place for all cultural beliefs and values to coexist. It is a necessary managerial and leadership tool for conducting international business in our global marketplace. How do we build and enhance our level of multicultural awareness and skill?

- First, it requires us to know ourselves very well; our strengths, weaknesses, values, motivations, assumptions and biases, and continuously build our level of self awareness. This includes observing and reflecting on our own actions and behaviors as well as others behaviors and actions. Increasing our emotional intelligence; always watching, studying and learning about ourselves as well as others is essential to identify gaps that may exist and determine our developmental needs while leveraging our strengths.
- Second, we need to take the time to educate ourselves, ask a lot of questions and do some research to learn what we don't know and need to know with a true sense of interest and heightened level of empathy. There are many resources that can help do so including the book; *Kiss, Bow, Or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries* by Terri Morrison and Wayne A. Conaway.
- Third, appreciate the richness and complexity of differences that exist. Don't minimize or simplify the power of that diversity. Keep an open mind, be flexible and eager to learn about different people, practices and cultures. Find common ground, seek similarities and differences and make it a priority to respect and embrace those differences. Avoid stereotyping and make appropriate distinctions.
- Fourth, be an active listener. Hold back on making any assumptions or conclusions until you have fully understood the other person's perspective. Think before responding and take the time to recognize potential differences. Be fully present and attentive to what they are communicating to you and then reflect back to ensure accurate comprehension. This allows you to clarify and ask further questions if you have not heard accurately. Creating an open and honest dialogue not only results in more productive discussion but it also builds trust, respect and camaraderie.
- Fifth, seek out opportunities that allow you to push out of your comfort zone and expand your experiences in new ways. Take on projects that enable you to develop relationships with individuals outside of your own culture. Make it a priority to meet new people, learn about different customs and traditions, eat unfamiliar foods, listen to music of different cultures, and/or travel extensively when possibilities arise to do so. Initiate cross-cultural learning opportunities for yourself that push you in new ways. If you want to challenge yourself even further, take on the task of learning a second language.

- Last, but certainly not least, be genuine, authentic and transparent. Show vulnerability and sincerity in your interest and enthusiasm to be a partner. Be honest with your intentions and goals. Be just as open in sharing about your background as you are about learning about others. Remember to keep judgment out of the equation and work towards earning a level of trust that emerges when there is openness to appreciate, value and embrace differences. Look for ways to broaden this level of learning.

There is a wide variety of demographics in the workplace creating more complexity and challenge as well as tremendous opportunity and value. Many college students today have traveled and lived abroad for extended periods of time, much more than previous generations. Most organizations, institutions and enterprises (for-profit and not-for-profit) are conducting business across the globe. Our ability to gain experience, knowledge and comfort working in these environments will be a key part of our career success, learning and growth. Look for opportunities to enhance your multicultural awareness and enjoy the journey!

Ask Rita: Do you have a career question and/or a career story to share? Email your questions or stories to rita@ritaballenassociates.com

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