

The Something's Up! Cycle

The Something's Up! Cycle is a Reflective Intercultural Learning Cycle, inspired by the [Personal Leadership Cycle](http://www.plseminars.com/), and is a core intercultural competence development process and mindfulness practice. Practising the Something's Up! Cycle can help you develop intercultural sensitivity leading to intercultural competence.

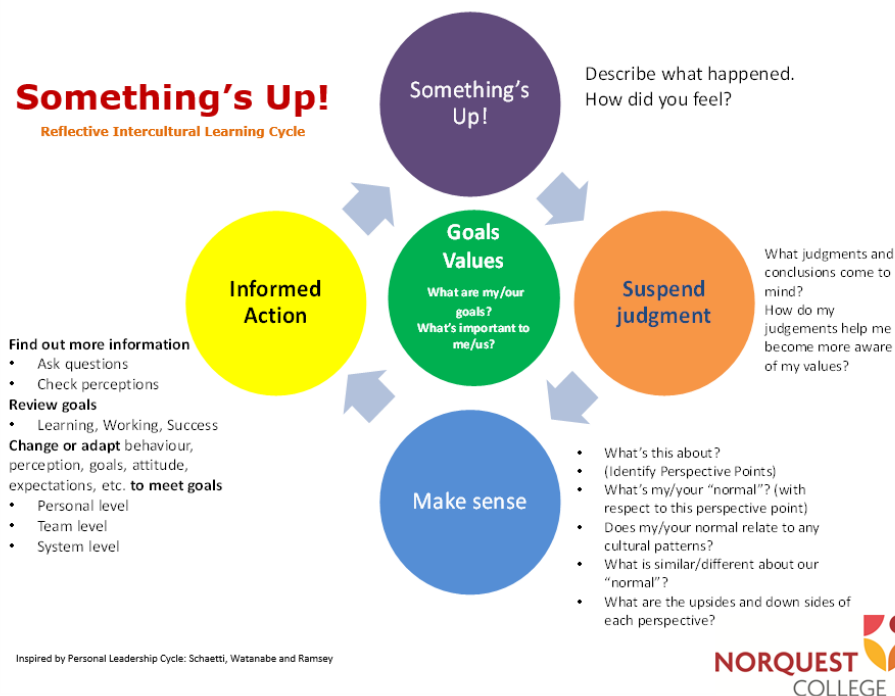
Intercultural sensitivity, as defined by the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), is developmental. Mindful application of the Something's Up! Cycle will help you achieve goals more effectively in intercultural spaces at work.

The Something's Up! Cycle encourages you to reflect on the ways that culture might impact understanding in intercultural spaces. This strategy can be applied in an anticipatory manner or to respond to a situation and with practice can become available in the moment (reflexive).

A situation that comes about due to a cultural misunderstanding has usually occurred when:

- Emotions become engaged (either positively or negatively)
- Another person's behaviour doesn't make sense
- It is difficult to understand something from our own point of view

The Something's Up! Cycle has four stages + Identifying Goals



Identifying Goals

Identify goals and their progress indicators that are important to you. Consider the following categories:

1. **Individual:** This kind of level goal is personal to you and has to do with change you seek personally like greater understanding, self-awareness, comfort, etc.
2. **Group (Community, team, interpersonal):** This kind of goal relates to something you would like to achieve with respect to relationships at a group level like creating shared understanding, increasing the effectiveness of a team, defining something together, etc.
3. **Action:** This kind of goal refers to something you would like to achieve with respect to something you do. For example develop a feedback process, create an orientation session, facilitate learning, etc.
4. **System:** This kind of goal is focused on influencing (changing) systems, structures or process that support or influence what

Suggested goal writing format:

I would like to

I will know I have made progress on this goal when

(from Intercultural Development Plan (IDP) M. Hammer, 2007, 2011)

Stage 1: Something's up

This first stage of the cycle is about noticing differences and usually occurs when one person's behavior does not meet with the expectations of another.

Signs that "something is up" include:

- Feeling threatened, overwhelmed, disapproving, or exhilarated
- Feeling the need to hang on to something familiar
- Withdrawing without explanation
- Different understandings of an agreement
- Thinking everything is fine when another person is distressed, upset, or frustrated
- Feeling confused

At this stage of the cycle, ask yourself:

- What happened?
- How did I feel?
- How did (might) others feel?

Stage 2: Attend to and suspend judgment

Judgment involves all the ways of coming to conclusions about what has been perceived. Judging something as right or wrong or good or bad is a normal, often automatic, response to many situations. In many ways, this reaction is a natural display of cultural values. Our culture gives structure and meaning to our experiences and enables us to make sense of the vast amounts of information we receive every day. In cross-cultural interactions, however, these types of judgments can get in the way of mutual understanding and innovation.

When we take the time to reflect on a situation—in other words, when we identify judgment—we can gain valuable insights into what is happening and increase our cultural self-awareness. When you try to identify a judgment, consider these categories of conclusions we may be coming to:

- Credibility: That person does not seem credible, how can I trust them
- Leadership ability: That person is not a good leader
- Fairness: That's not fair
- Ethics: That is not ethical
- Competence: This person just doesn't seem competent
- Trust: I'm not sure I can trust this person
- Promotability: This person doesn't have leadership potential

At this stage of the cycle, ask yourself:

- What are my judgments?
- What do my judgments tell me about what is important to me?
- What conclusions might I be making?

Note: Acting from Stage 1 or 2 of the cycle is a **reaction** and may result in less than ideal outcomes.

Stage 3: Make sense

A Four-Step Process

At this stage of the Something's Up! Cycle observe and reflect on general patterns of behavior and expression to make sense of a situation. Stage 3 includes four steps:

At this stage of the cycle, ask yourself:

Step 1:

- What is this situation/misunderstanding about? (The observations can fall into two categories: See below
 1. ****Perspective Points**** that focus on interaction patterns and identity
 2. Observations regarding operational functions

Step 2:

- What did I expect? (What is my “normal”) it is important to describe this with respect to the **perspective point** identified in the previous step.
- What did the other person expect? (What is his/her “normal?”)

Step 3: This stage engages a deeper level of understanding by seeking commonality and acknowledging the value in different perspectives as well as the influence of context on behaviour. This stage builds empathy.

- How are our expectations similar and/or different?
- What contextual variables may be influencing this incident? (Historical injustice, transition stress, energy, mental illness, timing, other.)

Step 4: Look at what you said about your “normal” and then look at your cultural orientations list.

- Can you see any cultural value orientations that seem to align with your “normal”? For example: my tendency to get straight to the point seems to be about a direct communication style.

*Perspective Points

Perspective Points are issues, categories, activities, concepts that may be understood differently from different cultural perspectives or viewpoints. In other words do not have a universal nature. Identifying and exploring **Perspective Points** helps us examine something from multiple perspectives to determine whether or not there are “differences that make a difference” at a group, rather than individual, level.

The categories included in the table provide a means of organizing your observations. These categories will help you focus your attention and make sense of, inquire about or predict important differences in “the way things are done” as well as understand the relationship between these and judgments or conclusions that come about when expectations are not met. It is useful to note that sometimes there may be categories of things or concepts that exist in one culture but not in another.

Note: It is important to differentiate cultural generalizations from stereotypes. Something identified through your observations may be cultural if it is a pattern that exists at the group level. Culture specific patterns cannot however be assumed to be true of all members of any culture. This is when it becomes a stereotype. For example:

Cultural generalization: Canadians tend to like hockey or many Canadians like hockey.

Cultural stereotype: All Canadians like hockey.

Example Perspective Points

The categories in the following table provide general categories for observing and analyzing cultural differences. Intercultural communication competence emphasizes the influence of group normative patterns on human interaction. Intercultural competence is associated with the ability to recognize patterns of behaviour.

<p>Language use How we use language for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologizing • Greeting • Complimenting • Saying goodbye • Changing the subject • Introducing someone • Disagreeing • Other ritual language uses <p>Non-verbal behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye contact • Speaking volume • Tone of voice • Touch • Space • Smell • Clothes • Gestures • Other <p>Organizing messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linear/circular • Direct/indirect <p>Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early, on time, late • The right time to . . . • How long it takes to . . . (e.g., build trust, make friends, plan, get things done, etc.) 	<p>Leadership How does a person in a leadership role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a decision • Run a meeting • Delegate • Participate in a meeting • Disagree • Reward • Discipline • Give feedback <p>“Norms” regarding team work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to <u>participate</u> • What to <u>participate</u> • Where to <u>participate</u> • When to <u>participate</u> <p>Roles of and relationships between</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men • Chair/Team lead and other board/team members • Boss and worker • Provider and client • Staff and volunteer • Parent and child <p>Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change of status • Change of roles • Position in the community <p>Other (Cultural Value Orientationsⁱ)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to decide what’s fair • How to join groups • How to relate to power • How to establish trust • How to establish credibility
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If/when expectations are not met in any of these areas, misunderstandings can arise and influence the way individuals or groups interact with and perceive one another and draw conclusions about:

- Rapport
- Credibility
- Trustworthiness
- Reliability
- Competence
- Leadership ability
- Intelligence
- Professionalism
- Loyalty
- Priorities
- Value
- Motivation
- Ownership
- Effectiveness
- Authority
- Promotability

Ultimately, each of these areas is about trust. So, by taking the time to create shared understandings and build relationships, individuals and groups can improve trust between individuals and groups.

Observations Regarding Operational Functions (Systems)

As well as observing and reflecting on general, culture-based norms, you can increase your awareness of the way cultural norms influence operational level functions. Some aspects of the way an organization or system functions may be unfamiliar to new members (i.e. of a workplace team, running meetings, performance management, elections, a community, a family, etc). Tasks and procedures that seem routine, simple, or straightforward on the surface are often founded on complex layers of cultural values and norms that influence different aspects of operation and decision making. These are norms and rules developed within one cultural context (i.e. Canada) may not be familiar, or even make sense, to people from other places with other systems. They may also systematically exclude.

Within organizations, operations can be further expressed as three essential activities:

- What 'it' does (i.e., mission and vision, products/services, fiduciary, strategic planning, etc.)
- Who does 'it' (i.e., community members, directors, managers, staff, volunteers, etc.)
- How 'it' is done (i.e., governance processes, management, policies, bylaws, meetings, retreats, Peer Learning Circles, registration processes, safety, voting, campaigning, characteristics of success, academic integrity, etc.)

Stage 4: Informed Action

The fourth stage of the Something's Up! Cycle is about preparing to **respond** to a situation. Informed action implies that different perspectives have been considered and the best response possible has emerged.

At this stage of the Something's Up! Cycle, ask yourself:

- What can I/we do to move forward?
- What are the short term actions?
- What are the long term considerations?
- How can I the information from the analysis of the Something's Up help inform my/our action (response)?

Actions can target the same 4 levels¹ used in identifying goals:

1. **Individual:** Is the action I need to take personal? For example we can't change others and so the change may be to understand why something results in a something's up for you and then working to reduce the emotional impact of that behaviour in the future.
2. **Group (Community, team, interpersonal):** Is the something's up indicating that there is something that needs resolution at the group (or interpersonal level)? Do we have shared understanding? Do we need to discuss this?
3. **Action:** Is there something I need to do differently or put into action as a result of the something's up? How does my analysis through the lenses of the cultural value orientations help me access other perspectives and thus other possibilities for action or innovation?
4. **System:** Is there something at the system level that needs to be reviewed? Does the system or process in place support the actions I feel are needed?

Example informed actions:

- Check your perception (with a cultural informant or directly if it is safe and reasonable to do so)
- Review goals to determine if the misunderstanding is getting in the way of important goals
 - Example goals: Be inclusive, learn, build a welcoming community, build partnerships, build trust, establish credibility, live in a safe community, etc.
- Use the **Perspective Points** to have a meaningful conversation about cultural differences and to seek mutual understanding.
- Change or adapt to meet goals based on clearer understanding
 - Example changes: Behaviour (i.e. Behaviour: using silence to express disagreement change to: establish shared understanding of alternate ways to

¹ This is based on Integral Theory AQAL Model (Wilber, 2005)

communicate disagreement and maintain harmony goals), perception, goals, attitude, expectations, etc.

- Engage culturally inclusive strategies
- Explore the upsides and downsides of each perspective as a means toward innovation and creative alternatives.
- Discuss opportunities and implications for change or adjustment on organizational personal or interpersonal levels.
- Review and adapt an orientation process.
- Be purposeful about building relationships and getting to know one another.

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ⁱ Cultural value orientations or dimensions provide ways to understand core cultural differences related to basic human concerns. There are several collections that are useful in understanding the ways people “make sense” of the items in the cultural general framework presented with the RILC. To learn more about this level of cultural analysis use your web browser to search for work by G. Hofstede, F. Trompenaars or F. Kluckhohn, & F. Strodbeck. These can help to explain how some groups of people are more individualistic and others more collectivist and how this impacts family, relationships, motivation, communication style, etc.