WE ARE ALL CULTURES

Culture. We hear this term a lot but what does it mean? Well, would you be surprised to learn that there is no agreement on an exact definition of culture! It often gets used synonymously with terms like nationality, ethnicity or ethnic identity, and race. But an accepted definition of culture is:

> Patterns of learned behaviours, beliefs and values that are shared among members of a group, and are transmitted to group members over time: A social system of meaning and custom that is developed by a group of people to assure its adaptation and survival. A set of unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviours, and styles of communication distinguish cultural groups.

Individuals living in Western Canada may exhibit differences in culture from those living in the Maritimes. At the City of Calgary, we also have our own organizational culture, developed over the years based on our corporate values and priorities, our styles of communication, and how we think and work together. This resource page will be focusing on ethno-cultural diversity and less about corporate culture.

Ethno-Cultural Diversity in Calgary

Our cultural identity can also be related to our sense of belonging to any group that differs from others in terms of culture or ethnicity, and sometimes nationality, language, race or religion.

Our ethnic identity, ethnicity and ethnic origin refer to the condition of belonging to a social group with a cultural and social system that claims, or is accorded, status on the basis of religious, linguistic, ancestral or physical characteristics. People both within the group and outside the group recognize it as a unique collective.

An ethnic group is a group of people who share a common ethnicity, heritage, culture, language, social patterns and a sense of belonging. Examples of different ethnic groups are: Aboriginal (Dene, Blackfoot, Cree, Metis Settlement, Lakota), African, Caribbean, South Asian, Chinese, Latin, Central, and South American.

In terms of ethnic origins, most Calgarians are of European origin (e.g., British Isles or Western European origins), but the ethnic make-up continues to flourish: it is expected that Calgary's visible minority population will grow from 22% to 38% between 2006-2031 (Statistics Canada) or upwards of 40% by 2020 according to the average rate of growth for the last three federal census cycles! We also have close to 120 languages spoken in the city of Calgary!

Did you know that in 2010 the immigrant population in Calgary was almost 30% of our total population and that it is projected to reach almost half a million by 2020? Calgary attracts over half of its immigrants in the ages of 25-55 years. As of 2009, the leading source countries are India and China, with the top native languages of new immigrants in Calgary being English, Tagalog (from the Philippines), Punjabi, Spanish, and Mandarin. Immigrants typically come to Alberta through the regular immigration process or as part of the temporary foreign worker program.

Aboriginal Diversity in Calgary

The Canadian constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis, and Inuit.

The term "Aboriginal" should be used only as an adjective to describe individuals or mixed groups of First Nations, Métis or Inuit people. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, histories and political goals. It has been incorrectly used as a noun, as in: "The Aboriginals are…" The proper usage is: "the Aboriginal peoples are… ". The term Aborigine is not used in Canada and is considered to be offensive.

Calgary is also home to 26,575 Aboriginal persons or 2.5% of Calgary's total population in 2006. It is a very young population with 46% under 25 years old (versus 33% of non-Aboriginal persons). This means there is a young and vibrant pool of prospective employees to draw from.

Cultural Diversity at Work

What does it mean to The City of Calgary and you as an employee?

The City has a diverse workforce made up of people from various backgrounds including different ethnicities, languages, and cultural groups. These individuals bring with them much valuable experience, including experience working in a multilingual environment, or in workplaces which may differ from those in Canada. While most cultures hold similar values, e.g. honesty, importance of family, doing a good job, etc., the way these values are demonstrated may differ.

For example, while family is important to all cultures, what a family looks like differs across cultures. In Northern European Caucasian cultures, the 'nuclear' family is held to be the ideal. This is mom, dad and perhaps 2-3 children. Other family members are seen as outside this 'nucleus'. However, in many Aboriginal communities, the idea of family is much broader and includes aunts, uncles, grandparents and even close family friends as part of the 'nucleus'. In Canada, the goal for children is generally to leave home after high school or university and begin to live an independent life. This pattern reflects the values of autonomy, self-reliance, and independence. However, in many Asian cultures, it is expected that children will stay in the home until they marry, and then they will often move in with their parents or have their parents move in with them. This reflects the values of group harmony, filial piety (i.e. to respect one's parents and ancestors), and interdependence. None of these expressions of the value of family or independence vs. interdependence is better than the other, they are just patterns of behaviour that work best in the different cultural contexts.

Depending on an employee's culture, an intelligent person may be perceived as a person who is slow and deliberate in thought and speech. In another culture, someone who thinks 'on his/her feet' or who can respond quickly to a question is considered to be intelligent. Which is your cultural preference? What happens if you belong to a culture that values quick thinking but you see someone taking his or her time? Do you get frustrated or wish they would get to the point and speed up? And if your culture values slow, deliberate speech and action, do you think someone who is fast-paced, and quick to speak, is immature, rude and or aggressive? It is easy to judge someone negatively just because they have learned a different cultural pattern than you.

The bottom line here is that we are all different – our cultural backgrounds have taught us different ways of behaving, communicating, and working together. There is not one RIGHT way. Different cultures all have value. Being open to a person's cultural differences may lead you to a new perspective or way of working you may have not considered before. If you would like to learn more about different cultures around the world, check out Geert Hofstede's website, which compares the cultures of various countries.

Tips for Inclusive Behaviours

When we encounter differences, it is natural for us to think 'we' (that is our culture) have the right way to do things, and we expect others to conform to that way of being. The reality is that many different patterns of behaviour are legitimate and valuable. Our task is to leverage these differences to

create opportunities to view issues, tasks, decisions and solutions through different lenses. This is what sparks creative solutions and innovation. How do we do this?

- Reach out to colleagues, especially if they are new to The City and go for coffee or lunch to welcome them and get to know who they are beyond the superficialities of ethnicity.
- If you're interviewing diverse candidates, you can review some inclusive best practices with the hire immigrants road map.
- Learn about the different cultures and experiences of your team members be they immigrants, Aboriginal, 5th Generation Chinese or from Eastern Canada. What challenges do they face and what can you share about your cultures and values?
- Don't just focus on the superficial aspects of culture like food, dress, dance. While these may be important, other cultural aspects like language, religion, social history, political experience, etc. will be more informative about that person.
- Acknowledge and celebrate the different cultural and religious traditions of your employees. This includes things like Christmas, Ramadan, Diwali, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year's, Aboriginal spirituality and ceremonial practices such as the medicine pipe bundle ceremony, etc.
- Use popular culture to learn more about the cultures and experiences of your team members. There are a variety of books that are first-hand accounts of a person's experience in a new culture, and some very good movies that explore the differences and similarities between cultural groups.
- Challenge thoughts like 'Why can't we all just be Canadian?" or "Why don't they just learn to be like us"? Who is Canadian? Whose cultural values are reflected in our dominant image of 'a Canadian'? What would happen if someone were to forget his/her cultural identity and adopt a new one? Is this possible?
- Take an opportunity to attend some of Calgary's many multicultural events and festivals, e.g., GlobalFest, Afrikadey, National Aboriginal Awareness Week, Calgary Franco Festival, Oktoberfest, Taste of Jamaica, Serbian Fest, ImaginAsian Festival, Calgary Ukrainian Festival, Carifest, Calgary Greek Festival, Calgary Turkish Festival, Fiestaval Latin Festival, Chinatown Street Festival, and so many more!
- The City of Calgary has partnered with the Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council (CRIEC) to offer a 1 on 1 mentoring program for internationally trained professionals. Ever wonder what it might be like to mentor someone in the same field as you? Someone with the talent, skill set, experience and passion to succeed in the workplace? A person who will leap at the opportunity to learn how to search for the right job? If so, connect with CRIEC and get started today!
- Become familiar with The City of Calgary's policies and reports on issues impacting different cultural groups, e.g, Racialization of Poverty, Signposts, Welcoming Community Policy.

More information?

City of Calgary links:

The Calgary Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee (City of Calgary)

External resources:
Calgary Local Immigration Partnership (CLIP)

Movies that explore diversity issues

A great resource for books for children, youth and adults with diversity themes

Cross or Intercultural Communication

More definitions