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## **How to Improve Your Cultural Competency and Avoid Being "Clueless" — Five Clues**

[Tom Finn](#)



Tom Finn is a global leadership consultant who works with leaders and organizations on business success through diversity. He is also the author of *Are You Clueless?* The book was reviewed in the Winter 2008 issue of *The Diversity Factor*.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Today the workforce has become so multicultural that managers and organizations have to deal with an ever expanding number of cultural differences. And understanding these differences can impact a company's success with its customer base. In this article, Tom Finn uses his customers' stories, including "A Bank for White People," to show how easy it is to miss out on new business and lose great talent through natural "cultural cluelessness." It is a message which is particularly important for business managers and leaders responsible for developing marketing strategy as well as those who manage internal training programs related to diversity and improving cultural competency.*<sup>1</sup>

Crossing cultural lines — whether in seeking customers, motivating an employee, talking to a student's parents, or caring for a patient — involves stepping into the unknown. Expanding your business or your influence as a leader in a multicultural world includes knowing about hesitancy, and not only that of others.

### **Clue #1 — Cross the Room**

The only thing I remember about the first dorm meeting of the first day of college was Lionel. I was sitting across the room from a dark, unsmiling, big black man. I came from an all-white, small town. I began to think I should meet Lionel — we were dorm mates, both freshmen, both new. Why not introduce myself?

But I was trembling. I was scared. With so little previous interaction with black people, all I had to go on were all the stereotypes and news reports. He was threatening to me, without doing or saying a thing.

Eventually I crossed the room. Eventually we were roommates and I the best man at his wedding. But that hesitation, and the internal energy I expended, is duplicated countless times every day across the United States and the world.

**"In over 20 years of consulting, I have seen that hesitation cost companies business, as culturally diverse customers decide not to approach."**

In over 20 years of consulting, I have seen that hesitation cost companies business, as culturally diverse customers decide not to approach. I have seen it bottle up employees who fear telling their bosses and organizations how their difference from the organization's majority groups influences their progress and productivity.

And this example is just about race. Consider all the different people you deal with in your business or agency, hospital or school — whatever your workplace. They may differ by age, language they speak, religion, sexual orientation, education, social class, nationality, and many other ways.

Do you really think you know what makes them all tick?

Do people representing all those differences knock on your door to buy your product, seek your mentoring, or help you accomplish your organization's goals?

Or are they waiting for you to "cross the room"? The evidence in my book suggests that many leaders and organizations are clueless to culture's impact. That impact includes lost customers and profits, customers spreading bad news about your company, key talent going elsewhere, and employees having no clue how to handle multicultural situations. What don't we know — and how much can *knowing* pay off? A lot, if you consider those business impacts.

Are you clueless? The answer to that question, in a global world, could bring you new customers, solve your need for scarce talent, and resolve community and school conflicts. With a few Clues, that is.

*Crossing cultural lines involves risk. Initiate.*

#### **Interlude — A Note on Culture**

You may have noticed that I included an example of race when I spoke about "crossing cultural lines." I am using a broad definition of culture because I believe there are many groups — not just ethnic or national ones — that have differences that distinguish them from others.

Here is a working definition of culture:

*"The behaviors, ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, customs, language, and ceremonies of a people or group that are transferred, communicated, or passed along."*

Take a good look at that definition. If groups have different behaviors "passed along," then men and women have different "cultures," if you will. Different behaviors, expectations, and attitudes get passed down to men and to women.

What's more, different age groups, gays and heterosexuals, military and civilians — the list goes on — evolve their own sets of beliefs, values, and actions that pertain to their culture. As a leader, you are managing cultural differences even if your whole workforce is one race or nationality.

These subtler group differences — and the fact that leaders who are members of particular groups can't grow up knowing all the others — make cultural competence harder. Yet many people think managing cultural differences is easy, saying, "I don't see the problem." That's the issue: with culture, most often we don't know what we don't know. We don't see the problem.

It's no surprise that women have called men "clueless" for years. Or that the T-shirt slogan, "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand," makes perfect sense. I *wouldn't* understand —

**"It's no surprise that women have called men 'clueless' for years. Or that the T-shirt slogan, 'It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand,' makes perfect sense. I *wouldn't* understand — I'm not black."**

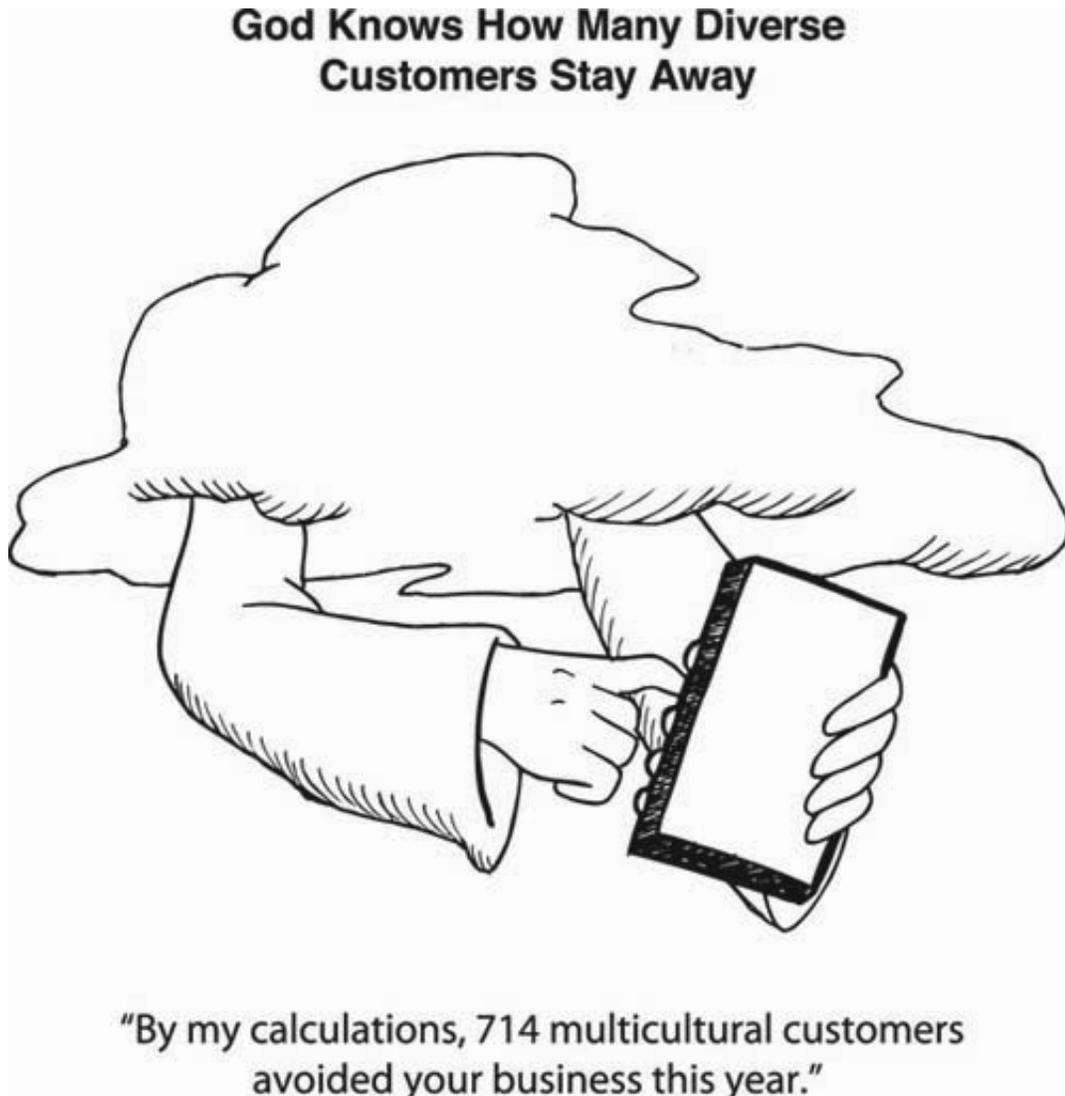
I'm not black.

Cluelessness extends to many dimensions of diversity, so the five recommendations of this article apply just as much to differences in religion, sexual orientation, and generations as they do to national cultural differences.

And the good thing about that is that this broad definition provides you and your business or agency a whole bunch of opportunity.

**Clue #2 — See How You Are Seen**

*Do you know how many customers or consumers don't approach your business for reasons related to culture or diversity? As this drawing suggests, maybe only God knows. But I know it happens from the stories customers tell me. "Crossing the room" in a business or agency means knowing that stories like "A Bank for White People" exist, and cranking up your information gathering and outreach to growing cultural segments.*



**A Bank for White People**

A bank hired a female manager who spoke Spanish. As happens with so many businesses, she often became the resource to whom everyone would run when a Spanish speaker walked in,

though that wasn't the position for which she was hired.

A Spanish-speaking couple came in. They didn't have an account. They were shopping for a bank.

Manager: *Have you been here before?*

Couple: *No.*

Manager: *And what brought you in today?*

Couple: *We heard you had someone who could speak Spanish. We never came in before because we thought you were a bank for white people.*

How many of the bank's employees do you think had been thinking, "Yup, we're a bank for white people?" I'm quite certain the bank didn't promote itself as "the number one bank for white people in our region!"

Looking in, though, from the customer's perspective, that is the image a Latino couple had. Consider who your customers are, by cultural group, and expand that definition of "culture" beyond ethnicity and national origin to people with disabilities, religious groups, gays and lesbians, military people, and foreign language speakers. Who is walking in your door... and who is not?

Then think about the simple step this bank took that brought in a new customer: Someone who spoke the customers' language became an employee.

*See what diverse customers see.*

### **Clue #3 — Expand Your Idea of Customer**

*In a multicultural market, you need to think multicultural. Think niches — cultural niches — for your products and services or for your agency's or school's constituents. Cultural niches go well beyond nationalities. And if you impress that niche, take a look at what happens.*

### **Gaining 1,000 Customers**

Here's an easy way to pick up 1,000 customers.

For one of my customers, let's call the company XYZ Health Care, I spoke with a group of 16 women who were members of a local Muslim foundation. They were asked to give their view of the health care system, which has several hospitals and other smaller clinics.

One of the women explained that her mother had a horrible experience at one of the system's hospitals.

Muslim Woman: *Everyone in my family knows about that incident and they will never go to that hospital.*

On the other hand, she said, she had a wonderful experience at another of the system's hospitals, and she praised the care and the people at that hospital continuously.

Muslim Woman: *Everyone in my family also knows about my good experience at that hospital.*

**"Consider who your customers are, by cultural group, and expand that definition of 'culture' beyond ethnicity and national origin to people with disabilities, religious groups, gays and lesbians, military people, and foreign language speakers. Who is walking in your door... and who is not?"**

She made this statement, of course, in the company of the 15 other women, thus spreading the news again.

I was curious that she emphasized "everyone" in the family. I asked:

Finn: *How many people are in your family?*

Muslim Woman: *Sixty-four that live around here.*

Finn: *Sixty-four?*

Muslim Woman: *Well, yes, most of us have large families, and there are aunts and uncles and cousins . . .*

Finn: *So you've talked to all 64 about your experiences with XYZ?*

Muslim Woman: *Oh, yes, they know about the bad one and the really good one.*

As she was saying this, all the 15 other non-related women nodded. I got more curious about the spread of information. Before I could ask, another woman piped up,

Second Woman: *Yes, we tell each other everything — where to get a good haircut, where the sales are.*

I had already heard and seen, in touring the foundation, that this was not really a funding organization. There was a school and a large play area for kids.

*We have gatherings most every week for families. Everybody comes.*

Finn: *About how many people come to the foundation for the gatherings?*

Second Woman: *Oh... about 1,000.*

Just a little research and you will find that this kind of immediate, burgeoning networking is how it's done among culturally diverse ethnic, racial, religious, even gay and disability communities. Not everyone knows, for example, that there are gay yellow pages. The former head of U.S. Advertising for American Express and two marketing professors confirm that word-of-mouth is *the* method for reaching cultural groups.

A credit union manager in California says of the Latino community he serves: "This community is very word-of-mouth oriented. They trust only the people their family and friends trust."<sup>2</sup> In Boston, where one in four residents is an immigrant and where 140 languages are spoken, word of mouth becomes the newcomer's "instant messaging."<sup>3</sup>

It makes sense. If you're different from the mainstream, there's something very comforting about gathering with those like you. There's also an easy leap to conversations about businesses that treat you well, and those that don't, because everyone understands what you go through everyday when you are different from the mainstream population.

*Looking for customers who bring in customers? Impress a cultural network.*

#### **Clue #4 — Use Radar**

*Most cultural puzzlers are just that — puzzling. We are mystified by the "other's" behavior. Yet*

*you can add a news lens that will clear up a lot of mystery. You can significantly increase your cultural competence by adding cultural group radar to your repertoire.*

### **Sometimes You're a Group**

Consider that whenever you deal with anyone, you are not just talking person-to-person. You are working with people whose behavior and attitudes are partly due to personality. That's where most of us focus and try to fix things, or, more often, fix the other person!

When different cultures come into the mix, however, consider this possibility: you are now dealing with someone whose behavior and attitudes may also be influenced, say, by being Asian, male, Buddhist, even heterosexual. The level of impact this may have on people's perspectives varies; here I am asking you simply to add this *group-level* consideration to your repertoire as a leader.

There are two sides to remember in regard to group-level impact: the actual behavior of the person, or the way they are *treated* as a member of a group.

For example, you may have some characteristics that you ascribe to being male or female — you likely have some mix. But there are some traits that you associate with your gender. In my case, my father taught me "boys don't cry." Other boys, coaches, and the mores of our society reinforced this lesson constantly; so, I see myself behave in accordance with that "law" sometimes, even though I think it's nonsense.

**"The important point here is that even if I don't believe I behave in ways that are associated with my 'groups' (racial, gender, ethnic, sexual orientation), there are times when I am treated by others in accordance with *their view* of my group."**

There are also times when I am treated as a group, not as the individual I am. When I jogged in my old neighborhood, I would pass women I didn't know. I would say hello. What was the response I got 90 percent of the time?

Nothing. No reply, and a look away.

Why? I presume this response had nothing to do with me at the *individual* level: Tom, the nice guy! This response I am certain was a *group-level* response: in this case, I was MAN. That man jogging down the street might have been the Central Park rapist for all they knew, or a personification of all the media stories about men who attack women.

The important point here is that even if I don't believe I behave in ways that are associated with my "groups" (racial, gender, ethnic, sexual orientation), there are times when I am treated by others in accordance with *their view* of my group.

You can use this knowledge to improve your ability to work with other cultures. As this article suggests, group radar can improve your sales, your service, and your management of diverse employees.

*Expand your repertoire — consider cultural group influence.*

### **Clue #5 — Make Sure Your Leaders "Get It"**

*Customers avoid companies who treat them or others they know with insensitivity to their cultural background, whether that be race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and other differences. Employees — countless of them that I know — refuse to bring up issues that demotivate them or cause them to leave because they have seen evidence that their manager will dismiss their culturally related concerns. They simply say, "He doesn't get it." A few simple*

*words that sum up a lot of turnover, "working in place," and lack of engagement in your workplace.*

### **Getting It**

There are certain experiences I will never go through and therefore never completely understand. For instance, I'll never be pregnant. I'll never fully "get" all the lifelong implications of pregnancy for the mother.

Similarly, in managing cultural differences, there will be many experiences you will never fully get about how your employees who are different from you experience the world and your organization.

The importance of "getting it" to create a climate where difference can thrive, however, is not to make you identify with the other person. Indeed trying to do so can be comical and offensive, and worsen the climate. I cringed for the thousandth time at the eye doctor's office one day when I heard a middle-aged white man overdoing his attempt to identify with the young black man assisting him by saying, "Thanks, man" a couple of times. One of the things I appreciated about my father being "square," as we used to say, is that he didn't try to be like us teenagers.

**"Diverse employees have told me many times that they watch the pattern of how openings get filled, and they are often disappointed that the same people by cultural group fill those places."**

You can get it without losing yourself. The idea is not to identify, but rather not to compound the employee's perception that the culture treats them differently by dismissing their perception. [quote] The history of diversity in the workplace is that the victim gets blamed. Sexual harassment is the classic case of this, where those who are harassed are much more often reluctant to say anything because they feel the spotlight will fall on them [end quote] for being overly sensitive or provocative. Though whites feel blacks "play the race card" too often, many blacks actually play it very little, because they don't want to be seen as making excuses.

"Getting it" simply means that you and your organization are willing to acknowledge that different treatment is possible — even if you don't agree that there's a problem. So you use these clues from the book: Clue 3: Clarify Your Cultural Lens and Clue 4: Apply Cross-Cultural Patterns to acknowledge that bias exists and that group-related experiences happen. Just remember it's not easy. When I am told I have done something that indicates a bias, my first reaction is to defend.

All of "getting it" about the impact of culture, however, does not have to be reactive. You can create a climate that champions diversity through modeling — an active demonstration that you know in your bones that competence with different cultures helps your business. Do you, for example:

- **Talk with your employees about how cultural difference** is affecting the sale of your product or service, the evaluations your teachers do of students, or the new ideas you are getting from your team?
- **Talk about cultural competence at all?** Is it ever an agenda item in meetings, a consideration in strategic planning, or part of a product plan?
- **Make personnel moves** that show your belief in the benefit of diversity by having a diverse set of employee applications to consider, having a diverse management team, including people from outside your team for input at a retreat or planning meeting?

- **Factor diversity into your customer approach** by using a diverse team to present to the customer or distinguishing how customers receive your service by cultural group?
- **Evaluate the impact of your workplace climate** on different group members (for example, do men experience your organization differently than women)? I was struck, for the umpteenth time, in doing focus groups at a university, how white men saw little impact of diversity on performance, perception, promotability, and climate. In the next hour, eight African American men, given the same questions, not only had clear examples for every question, but agreed that they experienced similar obstacles in many different departments and levels.
- **Use opportunities to fill open positions** by at least having a diverse pool of candidates? Diverse employees have told me many times that they watch the pattern of how openings get filled, and they are often disappointed that the same people by *cultural group* fill those places. Are you tracking this?

### Demonstrate "getting it"

In this article, in some ways an overview of my book, *Are You Clueless?*, I have suggested putting on your radar about cultural difference, expanding your idea of whom you sell to, seeing how different cultural groups see your business (if they see you at all), and "getting it" — making diversity and inclusion how you do business. Go ahead — cross the room.

### Endnotes

1. This article is based on material in the book by Tom Finn, *Are You Clueless? 7 Clues to Profit, Productivity, & Partnership For Leaders in a Multicultural World*, (Copyright 2007 Kells Castle Press) All rights reserved. Permission to redistribute electronically or in print must be attained from Kells Castle Press at 1-888-97CLUES or info@areyouclueless.com. Copies of the book are available at [www.areyouclueless.com](http://www.areyouclueless.com), [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com), and 1-888-97CLUES.
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