

Conducting Interviews with Intercultural Awareness

The scrutiny of an interview can be stressful. So when you're in the position of conducting an interview, you do your best to be sensitive to interviewees' feelings. You want to put them at ease; they want to do their best and be most true to who they really are.

And you want to be open not just to the best traditional "fit" for the position, but perhaps to a person who might help shape the church in expansive (and challenging!) ways.

Representing one's true self in an interview is not easy for anyone. There are even further dynamics at play, however, when the majority of the interviewing panel belongs to one ethno-cultural group and the person being interviewed belongs to another.

Who is accommodating whom?

An interculturally aware interviewing group will try to look at the process from the perspective of the other person, as in this composite example:

I am a minister from Korea being interviewed to assess my suitability for admission into The United Church of Canada. In attempting to communicate who I am in English, which is my third language. I must accommodate the committee's requirement that only English will be spoken. I will similarly accommodate the committee's conviction that a circle without a table is the best configuration for the interview, although personally, this arrangement makes me feel exposed and vulnerable.

I am doing my best not to panic at the thought of talking about myself with a group of individuals with whom I have no prior relationship, but I will accommodate this Western practice and hope that I will not be perceived as being evasive or vague.

I would like to offer the Executive Secretary a gift as a sign of respect, but I'm afraid the group might think that I'm trying to ingratiate myself to influence the outcome of my interview. I have learned not to cringe when a man in the circle crosses his legs and shows me the soles of his shoes, or to be offended by the apparent disinterest of a woman who knits while I am speaking. In this interview, I am in their culture, and I will accommodate to what they do and need.

I pray I will accommodate them well, because my family's future in Canada hangs in the balance.

Becoming an accommodating host

Recognizing how much of the responsibility to navigate cultural differences normally falls upon the individual being interviewed, a culturally aware interviewing group is committed to the principle of *mutual* accommodation. As the group in control of the interviewing process and format, it does whatever it can to narrow the cultural gap so the person being interviewed is less anxious and intimidated, and more able to accurately communicate their character and competencies. It is helpful to memorize the "Platinum Rule" coined by

Milton Bennett, one of the founders of the modern intercultural movement: “Treat others as *they* would want to be treated.”

Following this wisdom also means being attuned to generational differences. A third-generation Japanese Canadian will have a different facility in navigating Western cultural values and patterns and, therefore, a different way of relating to you as an interviewing group than a recent immigrant from Japan.

It remains true, however, that an approach of mutual accommodation requires an adaptive and flexible approach to interviewing rather than adherence to a formulaic, rigid model. Practices an interviewing group could employ to build bridges across the cultural divide, and to empower the person being interviewed, include the following:

Preparation

- Ensure that as many members of the group as possible receive intercultural competency training.
- Consult with a member of the interviewee’s ethnocultural community to offer “coaching” to the group regarding culture-specific sensitivities, for example,
 - formal greeting
 - eye contact
 - the meanings of silence and pause
 - posture toward hierarchy and authority
 - the meaning of gift-giving
 - the meaning of intonation in speech
 - how agreement and disagreement is expressed
 - gestures to avoid
- Vet the interview questions with the coach to avoid any inquiries that would put the interviewee “on the spot” regarding, for example, their personal circumstances or feelings.
- Make pre-interview documents regarding process and procedures available in the first language of the interviewee. If it is not possible to provide documents in the person’s language, have all documents rendered into plain English.
- Provide the questions that will be asked in advance so the person is less pressured to think on the spot in a language that is not their first language.

Representation

- Ensure that the interviewing group is racially and cultural diverse.
- Ensure that at least one person present at the interview is from the interviewee’s ethno-linguistic community.

Language

- Make provision for the interview to be conducted with the assistance of simultaneous interpretation, and ask the interviewee if they would like to take advantage of this service.
- If simultaneous interpretation is not possible, or not deemed necessary by the interviewee, ask the person if they would like to have someone present who is

fluent in English and the interviewee's first language to help should clarification be required.

- Have the interviewing group practice speaking English slowly and plainly for conversations with those who do not have advanced English fluency.
- Communicate that you consider the person's ability to speak more than one language to be a valuable asset, and that accented English is not a problem to be overcome.

Physical Space and Process

- Prior to the interview, ask for the interviewee's preference regarding the configuration of table/chairs for their interview. If the person is hesitant to indicate, follow the counsel of the cultural coach.
- Issue the invitation to the interviewee to bring one or more members of their family to the interview, if they wish.
- Begin the interview with an informal social time for personal connection. To signal honouring the person's culture, provide a sweet from their culinary tradition at the opening refreshment time.
- Acknowledge at the beginning of the interview your awareness that this is an intercultural encounter, and that both parties should feel free to ask questions for clarification, if needed.
- Confirm the interview as a "space" that seeks to honour cultural differences by inviting a member of the group to open with prayer in a language other than English, and/or by offering a prayer in English that asks God to bless their intercultural time together.
- Proceed in a fashion that facilitates deep listening in a safe space: be attentive to the other person, don't rush, communicate a comfort with silence and pauses, communicate affirmation and encouragement with your body language, show interest but don't pry, laugh together as much as possible (but never at anyone else's expense).

Guidelines for asking questions:

There is a tendency in our Western way of thinking to view the gathering of information as the primary purpose of an interview.

While some of this information is "personal" in nature, all of it is "of the person." Hence, what and how a person thinks, believes, functions, relates, and knows speaks of their very heart and soul. This heart is something an intercultural church seeks to honour and to protect. It recognizes that for interviewees coming from many non-Western cultures, the interview is not primarily about information sharing as it is about establishing a relationship.

An interviewing panel may ask a question that is intended to give information that will help them "get to know" an interviewee; meanwhile, the interviewee may be pulling away from the group because they are experiencing those questions as too direct, too personal, or too prying.

When asking interview questions, consider the following:

- Be aware that the issue of “saving face” is always present, regardless of the person’s cultural heritage. Do whatever you can to avoid making the person feel overly self-conscious or put on the spot to answer questions that it would embarrass them to answer.
- Be aware that too broad of an opening question can not only make it difficult to know where to start, but may immediately cross the uncomfortable boundary of sharing personal information. “Tell us about yourself” is too broad. “Tell us about your experience as it relates to this position” would be an improvement.
- Similarly, as the final question of an interview, it is common to ask, “Do you have any questions you’d like to ask us?” In many cultures, to ask questions is to be seen to not know what one should know. “Is there anything you would like to say to us before the interview ends?” would be an improvement.
- Generally speaking, Western thought patterns tend to be abstract in nature. This is not the case in many other cultural traditions, which employ concrete images and are story-based. It is always a good idea, hence, to include “scenario” or case study questions that will help an interviewee connect to their lived experience and lived expertise.
- Be aware that familiar interview questions such as “What you are reading these days?”, “What do you do when you aren’t working?” or “What do you do for self-care?” can carry with them some unintended freight of cultural judgment based on assumptions about what kind of books make for worthwhile reading, the appropriate balance between work and recreation, or what constitutes adequate self-care.
- It is best to avoid questions that put the person on the spot about either their reasons for immigrating to Canada, or how long they intend to stay. The first communicates that the group thinks some reasons are more valid than others; and the second question tends to be asked more frequently of racialized people, especially if they are coming from a country in the Two-Thirds World. Both questions emphasize the status of the person as an outsider, or “other,” who might be hiding some clandestine motivation. Interviewers for the United Church are neither immigration officers nor inquisitors.
- Interviewers do have a careful discernment to make, however. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to ask questions help the group get to know an interviewee’s posture toward the United Church without unfairly scrutinizing their motivations or intentions. These might include questions such as
 - “What is it about The United Church of Canada that appeals to you?”
 - “What are the similarities and differences you see between your current denomination and The United Church of Canada?”
 - “Can you tell us the story of when you heard God’s call into the ministry?”
 - “In what ways have you seen the hand of God at work in your decision to seek become a candidate for ministry/seek admission into the United Church/seek to become an interim minister?”

—Steve Willey, *Intercultural and Diverse Communities in Ministry*