

## 6.7—ATTITUDES TOWARD CULTURAL DIFFERENCE—FROM ETHNOCENTRISM TO ETHNORELATIVISM

In this activity you look at another aspect of adjustment: attitudes toward cultural difference. As your awareness of culture increases, your attitude toward cultural difference likewise evolves. The model summarized below by Dr. Milton Bennett describes this journey from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism:

### **ETHNOCENTRISM**

#### **STAGE I—DENIAL**

People in this stage don't really believe in cultural differences; they think people who are behaving differently don't know any better. These people tend to impose their own value system on others, knowing that they're "right" and these other people are "confused." They believe the way they behave is natural and normal and the way other people behave, if it's different, is wrong and misguided. These people are not threatened by cultural differences because they simply don't accept them. Generally, people in this stage have had limited contact with people different from themselves and thus have no experiential basis for believing in other cultures.

#### **STAGE II—DEFENSE**

These people have had an indication that their value system may not be absolute—and they're not happy about it. Unlike people in the denial stage, those in the defense stage believe in cultural difference and have accepted the reality of it, but they are deeply threatened by it and believe that other cultures are decidedly inferior. "This may be how things are, but it is not the way things *should* be." They know better than to try to impose their values on others, but they view other cultures negatively and prefer to have little or no contact with those who are different.

#### **STAGE III—MINIMIZATION**

People at this stage are still threatened by difference—that's why they try to minimize it—but they don't think that those who are different are inferior, misguided, or otherwise unfortunate. Rather, they believe that the differences are real but not especially deep or significant, that as different as people are, they are still more similar than dissimilar. We are

different on the surface, but underneath we share many of the same values and beliefs. If people in the denial stage deny difference and people in the defense stage accept but demonize difference, then people in the minimization stage try to trivialize difference.

## **ETHNORELATIVISM**

### ***STAGE IV—ACCEPTANCE***

These people accept differences as being deep and legitimate. They know other people are genuinely different from them and accept the inevitability of other value systems and behavioral norms. They still find some of these behaviors hard to deal with or accept, but they are not threatened by them nor do they judge them as wrong or bad. They do not normally adopt many of these behaviors for themselves nor necessarily adjust their own behaviors to be more culturally sensitive, but they have a more tolerant and sympathetic attitude. They are neutral, not positive, about differences. Difference is a fact of life.

### ***STAGES V & VI—ADAPTATION AND INTEGRATION***

In these stages, behavior as well as attitudes change. These people have gone from being neutral about difference to being positive. They not only accept cultural differences, but are willing and able to adjust their own behavior to conform to different norms. They are able to empathize with people from different cultures. In many ways, they become what is known as bicultural or multicultural, effortlessly adjusting their behavior to suit the culture of the people they're with, "style switching," in other words. They do not give up their own or birth culture's values and beliefs, but they do integrate aspects of other cultures into it. In the integration stage, certain aspects of the other culture or cultures become a part of their identity.

