



CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND INSIDER RISK

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Understanding the Intersection of Cultural Competence and Organizational Risk

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural Competence is the integration of individuals and groups to a set of compatible behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system (i.e., community, organization, agency) to enable effective work in cross-cultural situations.¹

Cultural competence requires organizations to:

- Value and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of its community
- Manage the dynamics of difference
- Acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge
- Conduct a self-assessment of their demonstration of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally
- Involve key stakeholders and its community



THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN ADVANCING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Together, people make up organizations, and an organization's culture affects individual behavior. Organizational Culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders, which are communicated and reinforced through various methods to mold employee perceptions, behaviors, and understanding.² There are many ways to describe organizational culture, including “culturally competent.”

Here are more commonly used terms for describing organizational culture:

- Customer-focused
- Innovative
- Fun
- Research-driven
- Technology-driven
- Process-oriented
- Family-friendly
- Risk-taking



A culturally competent organization has the capacity to introduce and integrate various cultures or subcultures in order to produce better outcomes and enhance operational effectiveness. In the context of insider risk, better outcomes and enhanced operational effectiveness can be measured by the successful prevention, detection, deterrence, and mitigation of the potential insider threat in all of its manifestations: cyber threats, espionage, fraud, sabotage, trade secret theft, unauthorized disclosure, mishandling classified information, and kinetic violence.

¹ What is Cultural Competence? Centers for Disease Control (2020). <https://npi.cdc.gov/pages/cultural-competence>

² Understanding and Developing Organizational Culture. SHRM (2021). <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/understandinganddevelopingorganizationalculture.aspx>

An evaluation should be completed to determine if an organizational culture lends itself to the requirements for cultural competence and proactively attempts to lower risk. Consequently, if an organizational culture does not lend itself to the requirements for cultural competence, then it may clash with its community and exacerbate risk in the work environment.

Insiders at risk of causing harm to themselves, harm to others, or damage to their organizations often display concerning behaviors that result from a combination of personal predispositions and/or an inability to cope with life stressors. These stressors that are frequently generated in the workplace can be caused by a hostile, toxic, and/or harmful work culture. Certain organizational cultures may cause or intensify stressors for members of its community and increase the risk of a potential threat. If this risk is not mitigated, then it can lead to exceptionally grave damage.



REAL WORLD EXAMPLE: NAVAL AIR STATION PENSACOLA SHOOTING

WHAT HAPPENED:

On December 06, 2019, 2nd Lt. Mohammed Alshamrani, a 21-year-old member of the Royal Saudi Air Force, shot and killed three American sailors and injured eight others at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida. Alshamrani was participating in a three-year international military training program.

FINDINGS:

A Naval Command Investigation Report from February 21, 2020, revealed that self-radicalization of 2nd Lt. Alshamrani was the primary motivation of the attack.³ However, the report also concluded the organizational environment of the program likely increased the probability of the insider attack.

The organizational environment of the training program created an adverse work environment due to unprofessional treatment of students by program staff and failed to comply with the command's harassment policy. Specific organizational behaviors and actions that contributed to the increased likelihood of the insider attack included but was not limited to: (1) harassment by a contracted instructor, (2) perceived inadequacy of religious facilities, (3) questionable interactions with instructors and international military student officers, and (4) inaction by military leaders, employees, peers, and civilians who were aware of risk indicators.

LESSON LEARNED:

This organization was unable to enhance its operational effectiveness in a cross-cultural setting. This organization failed to both adapt to the diversity of its international military student community and appropriately handle the differences between instructor and student. If these requirements of cultural competence had been met, then perhaps the commission of this hostile act, which was (1) rooted in anti-American and violent extremist ideology and (2) advanced due to disgruntlement intensified by a hostile workplace culture, could have been avoided. Though this event occurred in a military environment, all organizations benefit from cultural competence.



³ The Fatal Incident Shooting on Naval Air Station Pensacola on 6 December 2019, Command Investigation Report 21 February 2020. Department of the Navy (2020). [https://www.secnavy.navy.mil/foia/readingroom/HotTopics/Pensacola%20Investigation/Command%20Investigation%20-%20NAS%20Pensacola%20Shooting%20Report%20and%20Endorsements%20\(Redacted%20for%20Release\).pdf](https://www.secnavy.navy.mil/foia/readingroom/HotTopics/Pensacola%20Investigation/Command%20Investigation%20-%20NAS%20Pensacola%20Shooting%20Report%20and%20Endorsements%20(Redacted%20for%20Release).pdf)

CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND RISK REPORTING

Organizations are constantly evolving in their levels of cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and functional capacities to achieve cultural competence. Additionally, an organization's level of cultural competence will fluctuate as a result of changes in leadership and personnel. At any given time, these fluctuations will directly affect an organization's community and the potential for insiders to be at-risk. Though these fluctuations are expected, the reporting of potential threats and concerning behaviors should remain consistent and independent of organizational levels of cultural competency. Since risk will never be completely eliminated, an obligation to report risk is not diminished because an organization has met the requirements for cultural competence.

