



# HOW TO BE A CULTURALLY INTELLIGENT LEADER: 7 KEYS TO BOOSTING YOUR CQ

Colette Phillips

**As a business leader,** being culturally intelligent allows you to function more effectively in different settings. The more you understand how your own culture, experiences, and biases impact how you see the world, the more open you will be to helping others see the same. And the more people sense you are culturally intelligent, the more willing they will be to open up.

Cultural intelligence can help us recognize—and bridge—the many gaps among the Black, brown, and white experiences that whites often don't even realize. It can be used by institutions not just as a communications tool, but also to improve practices and make them more inclusive.

Consider, for instance, that many in the Black community are more comfortable going to African American providers – in part because they don't believe health care is delivered equally to people of color. COVID-19 exposed the health disparity between Black people and their white counterparts like a forensic MRI. Boston Medical Center rose to one of the nation's leading urban hospitals because its executives, like Dr. Thea L. James, intentionally focused (and still do) on understanding and addressing the needs of a diverse population. During the pandemic, the Center connected Boston's underserved populations to COVID testing and vaccines in more approachable, non-hospital settings within their own community.

With an open mind and a bit of homework, you can improve your cultural IQ as a leader, and navigate the multicultural landscape with fewer embarrassing gaffes, faux pas, and miscommunications. More importantly, you can begin to break down the walls of racism and exclusion.



Start with these seven strategies:

### **1. Get Comfortable with Feeling Uncomfortable.**

No one ever said it was easy to talk about racism. For whites, it feels like guilt or self-flagellation. For people of color, it can feel like making an excuse—“pulling the race card” when you speak out about getting seated in the back of the restaurant, or being overlooked at work for an earned promotion. When you start talking about racism, everyone gets nervous and fidgets and squirms. But if racism didn’t make us uncomfortable, that would be a real problem.

If you are uncomfortable speaking about racism as a white person, imagine what it’s like for a Black person who has to live with this ugliness every waking day of their life until they die. Ultimately, discomfort is a small price to pay for changes that can create a more racially equitable and just society.

### **2. Identify and Acknowledge Your Implicit Biases.**

Take a long hard look at yourself and your social circles and ask, “How might I unintentionally be contributing to the problem?”

Are any of my friends of a different culture or religion? How close are they really? If there are any people of color in my neighborhood, are they treated differently than white people? Are their children treated differently—or kept a bit more at a distance? The answers might surprise you.

### **3. Recognize Your Privilege.**

Too often, people think “white privilege” means they didn’t have a hard life growing up. In fact it just means that skin color wasn’t one of the things that contributed to those difficulties. When I walk into a room, people make assumptions about where I grew up—in a housing project or, when they hear my Antiguan accent, a tiny shack on an island. A white person may have grown up poor without running water in Appalachia, but when they walk into that same room, no one will make that assumption. Your skin color affords you certain privilege in society that you may not even realize.

### **4. Use Your Privilege to Lead by Example.**

Privilege is an enabler, however. It enables us to model the behavior we want to see for our children. Whether it’s using your position at work to advocate for building a more diverse team or clearly demonstrating your disapproval if someone uses racist tropes in conversation, becoming an influencer in big ways and small helps create a new normal and inspires those in our circles to follow your lead.

### **5. Commit to Inclusion.**

Becoming an Includer starts with your social and professional networks—the groups you get together with on Friday nights or volunteer with at your children’s schools. Do these groups include culturally diverse people? Are all the people you work with advancing at the same rate? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then be mindful about ways to be inclusive and contribute to making meaningful change. For example, invite someone who is culturally different to socialize at a work event. Better yet, invite them to your home.

## 6. Engage with Culturally Diverse Colleagues or Neighbors.

It's hard to empathize when you haven't really lived in somebody's skin or walked in their shoes—to understand, for instance, the stress factor a Black person confronts every time they walk into a room at work, a store, or a classroom. It's even harder to understand what that would do to everything from our professional advancement to our children's physical health. So sit down with a colleague or a friend and just talk about it. You'll be amazed at what you may learn.

The more people sense you are culturally intelligent, the more willing they will be to open up.

## 7. Be Curious about Other Cultures.

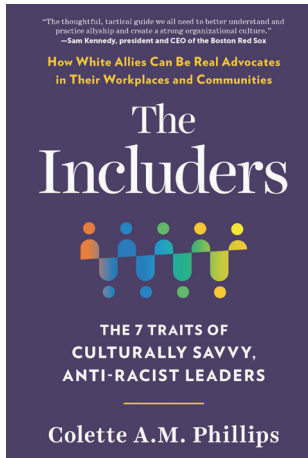
Notwithstanding America's longstanding history of structural and systemic racism, there are many resources in our local libraries, communities, and online to help passive sympathizers of all stripes become committed, informed allies and Includers. One resource includes *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving, a white woman from Winchester, Massachusetts who writes about how, in her forties, a graduate school class awoke her to the realities of her own unconscious bias. Or look online to see what culturally diverse activities or events are happening in your community or state.

Cultural intelligence is certainly not a standalone. It intersects with emotional intelligence: leaders with well-developed emotional intelligence often instinctively work to create a work environment that promotes a sense of belonging for employees.

Self-awareness, social awareness, and the ability to manage yourself as well as your relationships help build a mindset of empathy and the ability to listen and learn. **That, in turn, lays the groundwork for improving cultural intelligence, and building trust.** 📖



# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colette A.M. Phillips is president and CEO of Colette Phillips Communications, Inc., and founder and president of The GK Fund and the multicultural professional and business networking organization Get Connected! For 30 years, Colette has been a powerful voice and effective agent of change in one of America's oldest cities. An immigrant Black woman from the Caribbean island of Antigua described by *Boston Magazine* as "Boston's Great Connector" and cited by *Boston Globe* for "changing the conversation about diversity in Boston," she was the subject of a Harvard Business School case study for creating a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ecosystem. Colette has brought her passion, power, and wisdom to publications and C-suites around the globe. She has spent a lifetime making workplaces more inclusive, opening them to new markets, talent, and possibilities



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