



**March 23, 2018**

**WIL Highlights for Soumaya Khalifa, CEO/Founder of Khalifa Consulting**  
**“Intercultural Business Agility”**

Our featured speaker for this month was Soumaya Khalifa, CEO&Founder of Khalifa Consulting, and an expert on her topic, “Intercultural Business Agility.” In her enlightening and highly engaging presentation, Soumaya shared her extensive background in Human Resources and clearly demonstrated her credibility, i.e., why she’s achieved national recognition for her work in intercultural awareness.

Opening her remarks, Soumaya made the point that “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Before diving into her specific topic and amplifying on this point, she talked about her personal journey and the importance of each of us sharing our own story.

Soumaya and her 2 siblings were born in Alexandria, Egypt; her parents were both medical doctors; and she attended a French Catholic school. While she was growing up, her father accepted a position in Texas and moved the family there. Not surprisingly, Soumaya found herself in a completely new environment – an environment full of challenges and conscious and unconscious biases. It was here she truly started to learn about culture and cultural differences, an experience that would later shape her future.

For college, Soumaya chose to attend the University of Houston where she received a B.S. in Chemistry. However, she realized that science and medicine were not her true passion, and so she decided to go in a different direction. “I’m a people person,” she said, “and I knew that I needed to pursue a career path more in keeping with my personality.”

Both her career and personal journey were impacted when Soumaya met and married her husband and moved to Atlanta, now 30 years ago. As her HR career took hold, she also went on to receive an MBA in Human Resources at Georgia State.

Having shared her own story, Soumaya turned her attention and her further remarks to what she’s learned about culture and how to increase one’s cultural awareness. The following are some key lessons she shared through examples, role play, and her overall experience:

Studies done by McKinsey and others show that there’s a real need for intercultural agility in today’s business world – and – the talent for this is insufficient. Right here in ATL, there are shared concerns with so many organizations being global in terms of their employees as well as their client base.

On a scale of 1-10 on “how companies are doing” – the score is probably an “8 on Intention” but only a “4 or 5 on execution.”

Among the various cultural dimensions, five stand out:

- Hierarchy (vs Egalitarian)– Degrees of empowerment
- Group (vs Individual Orientation) – How decisions are made
- Relationships – How trust is established
- Communications (Direct vs Indirect) – How messages are delivered
- Time - How priorities are set or deadlines established

Cultural competencies include tolerance of ambiguity; resilience; curiosity; perspective-taking; humility relationship building; and authenticity.

Questioned on the subject of younger people and the interview process for many corporate type positions, it was said that “assimilation” is often required especially in a predominantly WASP culture. Being professional in your attire may be the difference in getting the job or not.

There are certainly generational differences in addition to cultural differences in today’s workplace. One way to react is to be an “ally.” Another is reverse mentoring. Overall, the main objective is mutual respect.

Steps to cultural agility include self-awareness, understanding the other person (figuring out the gap); deciding what to do to bridge the gap; and finding strategies to use.

Cross cultural work requires knowledge and awareness. The impact of culture is like an iceberg where 20% is visible (above the water line) and 80% is invisible (below the water line.)

Geographical culture: generalizations may or may not be true. Many layers like peeling an onion. Blind spots exist. “Ethnocentrism” exists (my view is right; strong judgment).

Insightful examples were shared re email communications (e.g., Saudi Arabia vs USA; Europeans vs USA etc).

Ideally, to overcome cultural differences, we need to reserve or suspend judgement. As with the “duck vs rabbit” graphic demonstration, we must recognize that we have different perspectives (some see the duck, others see only the rabbit).

Other examples involve cultural differences in “personal space,” shaking hands, how we greet each other in a business setting, etc.