

Cross-Cultural Training

Aren't people basically the same all over the world? Cross-cultural training...mhm. Doesn't that have something to do with the fine arts and the different way in which Americans use their forks and knives at the dinner table? Oh! That all sounds very interesting, but do Germans really need cultural training for the United States? After all, a whole generation of us have grown up with jeans, coke, Dallas and the Dream Team! Besides, many of us have had holidays in the States and some of us have even spent a year there as exchange students. Why then should one invest a week of one's valuable time in a cross-cultural training course?

Different business worlds

Individual examples quickly show why these courses can be valuable. Take the German automotive executive who was just promoted to head of sales for the Americas, a very senior position. Years earlier, he had already worked for his company in the United States. Then he

was transferred to Brazil before returning to the head office in Germany. And now he was on his way back to the United States. He booked a one-day brush-up course. His reasoning: The first stint in the States had taught him just how different the U.S. business world really was. In his new job he didn't feel he could afford too many mistakes at the start.

Then there was the young German manager who had married an American girl he met while studying at Wharton business school. His skepticism on Monday morning was hard to disguise: "Company policy is company policy, so that's why I'm here!" By Friday afternoon, he said it had been a very revealing week for him and that much of what he had previously experienced in the United States he could now understand and appreciate in a different light. "Above all," he confided, "I think I'm even beginning to understand my American wife!"

Are people really basically the same and do Germans really need this cross-cultural training stuff? At one level we can think of people as all being very similar – as a species, we certainly have more

in common with each other than we do with butterflies or cats. At a different level, we know that each person is unique. Between these two extremes we observe that some groups of people have more in common with each other than they do with those external to the group.

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The shared group characteristics may be physical, such as skin color, sex or age. Alternatively, they may be psychological or emotional and reflect personal experiences or deeply held values and beliefs. The characteristics used to define a group are largely arbitrary and primarily a function of what we wish to examine in the context of the group. Our interest may be in funeral rites or greeting customs or perhaps corporate behavior.

Cultural molds

Where someone grows up, be it in Alsfeld, Hesse, or Albuquerque, New Mexico, plays a dominant role in shaping that per-

Main types of cross-cultural training

Type of training	Focus	Method
Information seminars	Provide information about society, economy, politics, history, religion, customs, etc.	Lectures, anecdotes, tips & tricks, pamphlets, books, movies and videos
Culture-awareness seminars	Sensitize participants to their own cultural preferences and those of others	Sensitivity training exercises, games with synthetic cultures, group dynamics
Culture-assimilator training	Provides insight into foreign cultures and behavior in those cultures	Programmed learning: critical incidents, multiple-choice questions and explanations
World model training	Recognizes behavior patterns in a foreign culture based on key indicators	A complex, abstract model provides the basis for deducing culture-specific behaviors
Contrast-culture training	Understand relevant cultural differences and broaden one's behavioral repertoire	Case studies, role plays, short lectures, discussion
Coaching	Process-oriented support on actual participant issues; enhance intercultural skills	Discussion, conceptual background information, role plays, develop alternatives, support

son’s cultural mold: the perceptions, beliefs, values, expectations and attitudes held, which play a major role in governing an individual’s behavior. Studies examining differences in the behavior among people around the globe indicate that some 70% of the differences in behavior can be attributed to national culture, i.e. the values, attitudes, etc. acquired growing up as Germans, Americans or Chinese. The rest may be attributed to other factors such as social class, religion, profession, etc.

Communication counts

To work effectively within the context of a foreign culture requires the ability to communicate clearly with individuals of that culture. Clear communication includes the ability to interpret correctly the verbal and non-verbal signals received from others, as well as the ability to craft our communication in a fashion which permits it to be received and interpreted

as intended. Since communication is always filtered through cultural values – like light passing through a prism – it is useful to invest some time and effort in understanding the foreign culture involved and learning how to adapt our own communication (and behavior) to best achieve our intended results.

To this end a variety of training approaches have evolved within the relatively young discipline of cross-cultural studies. The table on page 109 lists the main types of training along with their principal focus and methodology.

Each of these methods has advantages as well as disadvantages. In selecting the most appropriate type of training one does well to consider a number of factors such as the complexity, duration and importance of the assignment, the training time involved, whether prior intercultural experience is required, the cost of the training, the extent to which situational behavior is practiced and the degree to which the emotional aspects of cultural differences are dealt with. The

German manager responsible for turning around the performance of a newly acquired, large U.S. subsidiary will probably benefit more from a particular type of training than the member of a Frankfurt-based audit team covering the Americas.

Misunderstandings must be avoided

In our increasingly global business environment it is not surprising to find cooperation across cultural boundaries intensifying. The personal pleasure and satisfaction we experience when going on holiday to a foreign culture, however, is seldom replicated when it comes to doing business with that same culture. The reason is obvious: Misunderstanding or inadvertently offending a hotel clerk, waiter or taxi driver while on vacation bears little consequence. Misinterpreting the intentions of a business partner during negotiations, leaving a poor first impression

Differing preferences in business situations

Business situation	Germany Cultural preference	United States Cultural preference
Meeting new people	Small talk is unpleasant, too personal and not professional	Small talk is necessary to assess a new person
Presentation	Logical, detailed, serious; problems are highlighted	Easy to understand, interesting; opportunities are highlighted
Negotiation	A serious responsibility; fair and reasonable offer should be made	A serious game (like poker); start high, plan concessions, prepare well and be friendly
Leadership	Responsibility emphasized, low individual profile, job = work, focus is on solving problems	Charisma, vision, optimism; boss radiates joy in his job, focus is on new opportunities
Employee motivation	Realistic goals motivate; positive group atmosphere is important	Ambitious goals motivate; attractive individual opportunities are important
Employee feedback	Positive feedback is seldom; negative feedback can be direct since high job/social security	Positive feedback frequent; negative feedback more indirect since lower job/social security
Decision-making	If issue is important it needs to be thought through very carefully	If issue is important it needs to be acted upon very quickly
Planning	Plan is to be well thought out, must avoid unwarranted risks and should be realized	Plan is to be well thought out, must be ambitious and followed until better opportunity identified
Team work	Orchestra model: performance achieved by putting priority on group result above individual performance	Football team model: performance achieved by each individual striving to be best
Company loyalty	Longer term, reciprocal commitment	Self-reliance; obtain personal market value or move on
Product orientation	Quality is most important; how can we make it even better?	Marketing is most important; if it does the job, how do we sell even more?
Service orientation	If the mistake is proven to be ours, we’ll fix it.	If the customer isn’t happy, exchange it or money back!

with a major customer or failing to meet the leadership expectations of one's local employees, however, does indeed carry significant professional and sometimes even personal consequences. The table on page 111 depicts several business contexts in which differing expectations, values and customs between Germans and Americans regularly clash.

Though more subtle than with China, Libya or Brazil, the cultural differences in doing business with the United States are very real and relevant. For numerous reasons it is today as important as ever for German companies to be successful in the U.S. market.

Best practice is crucial

Having demonstrated business success within one's home market does not automatically guarantee successful performance in a foreign business environment. Learning through trial and error can be very time-consuming and expensive – both for the individual and the company involved. Cross-cultural training has the

potential to compress learning times and improve in-job performance from the outset. It can facilitate the search for "best practice," which is especially crucial when cultures clash within a corporate context. It can contribute in a meaningful way toward understanding how the others think and feel without falling into the cultural trap of "going native." This makes for more effective managers and specialists and contributes to improved bottom-line performance.

As senior company managers increasingly recognize the contribution of such "soft skills" to achieving "hard results," they are instituting programs to make systematic use of the benefits offered by cross-cultural training.

So... maybe we need to think about cross-cultural training as being less about forks and knives and more about understanding how the other side "ticks." If we are able to extend our own behavioral repertoire to "tick" in tune, we can look forward to more productive relationships at work, an improved bottom-line and a more satisfying, personal, cross-cultural experience.



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