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INDUSTRY
MAGAZINE

MAY/JUNE 2020

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Why Successful Training Hinges on Learning Transfer



BUYER BEWARE: DON'T INVEST IN CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING YOU DON'T NEED

BY JAMIE B. GELBTUCH AND FRANK GARTEN, PH.D.

Much of cross-cultural training bought in the corporate world is the right solution to the wrong problem and yields low return on investment. When a multicultural team is not performing well, culture quickly becomes the scapegoat. The team's issues, however, are not necessarily the result of a lack of cultural knowledge.

The common perception is that working on cross-cultural teams adds layers of complexity. Yet, communication challenges, trust-building issues and power struggles can equally exist on monocultural teams. In fact, research has shown that ["country" can be a poor container of culture](#), as more differences exist within countries than between them.

Perception is a poor compass for deciding where to invest company dollars. In any investment decision, one should return to the facts and clarify the underlying problem that needs to be solved.

WHY DO WE BUY CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING?

In our experience delivering cross-cultural training, we identified three primary reasons why companies invest in it. First of all, confirmation bias kicks in. Rather than carefully analyzing the difficulty from multiple perspectives and breaking it down to define the root cause, our brain shortcuts to confirm our belief that problems on cross-cultural teams stem from cultural differences.

Secondly, today's work environment demands results. Reaching out to human

resources (HR) to schedule a training is quicker than working with team members to dig into biases and interpersonal dynamics. HR – feeling the same pressure to deliver results – then outsources the problem to an external training provider. Everyone feels pro-active about taking steps to solve the problem to the best of their abilities. In reality, we have farmed out the problem-solving two or even three times, and with the addition of each party, we lose sight of the real issue.

Finally, many organizations have an embedded culture of training. This becomes the go-to solution whenever the way of working needs to improve. Therefore, habit dictates that we should invest in a cross-cultural training when there is a problem on a cross-cultural team.

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WHAT HAPPENS IN A TYPICAL CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING?

The majority of cross-cultural trainings are based on cultural framework models founded on the idea that culture is something that can be measured and

cluster national cultures based on common characteristics, such as how people deal with hierarchy or how directly they communicate. Training uses this data to look at central tendencies in a target culture. However, the data does not isolate regional, generational, organizational or individual differences, the last two of which are most likely responsible for the challenges experienced on any team.

As a result, a cross-cultural training focuses on how cultures are supposed to be rather than how individuals actually are. A training about Brazil doesn't talk about your company's team in Brazil. It talks about working with 200 million Brazilians in general. Participants analyze cultural gaps in an effort to match the Brazilian team's behaviors to the tendencies predicted by the models. This is an oversimplification of the team's interactions that fails to take unique personalities into account.

On one hand, cross-cultural training provides "the joy of recognition." Participants often see their colleagues' behaviors in the cultural stereotypes. The models offer a way to structure our environment, so the world suddenly makes sense. Because data and observations have been organized, we perceive that we better understand different cultures. After the training, participants often say, "The material was interesting," or, "The course was good fun."

On the other hand, participants may resist the way a culture has been characterized, as they can cite counterexamples in their teams. They will refer to the Brazilian

manager who does not care for personal relationships, or explain that at their German innovation center personnel are not rigid at all. Cross-cultural trainers then quickly find themselves defending the models by pointing out behaviors that fit or adding disclaimers that the models may be inaccurate, outdated or “just a guideline.”

Additionally, participants point out that using these frameworks to explain behaviors contributes further to stereotyping and can go as far as creating blame. As we analyze the other culture, we may implicitly confirm that the problems we face are a result of the other culture. Our own behaviors, assumptions and openness to differences remain unchallenged. The problem intensifies when only half of the team is present to learn about the culture of the other half. An “us vs. them” dynamic replaces a collective responsibility to act as one team.

By the end of the training, cultural awareness and understanding have potentially improved. Yet, managers point out that team behaviors do not change in the long run. Consequently, cross-cultural training is often the right solution to the wrong problem.

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE REAL PROBLEM

We argue that every request for cross-cultural training should be received with caution to avoid defining a solution before defining the problem. So, what

should business managers, learning and development, and HR do to ensure they tackle the correct problem?

We can use five – often forgotten – steps from the high impact learning methodology:

1. Define the business objectives of the team (derived from the business objectives of the organization).
2. State the critical activities of team members to meet these objectives (i.e., what people should do).
3. Describe the current reality of the team (i.e., what people actually do).
4. Identify the gaps between the second and third questions. This defines the real problem.
5. Once question four has been completed and verified, the solution can be designed.

In our experience, few if any organizations work through this process internally before investing in cross-cultural training. Managers, for example, are under the pressure of many operational tasks that do not allow them to spend enough time deep. The in-depth dialogue required between HR and management often doesn't materialize.

After thinking through steps one through five, it is unlikely that the outcome is a need for a cross-cultural training.

These observations resonate remarkably well with those of Robert O. Brinkerhoff, which led to several often-used learning models. He states that, in corporate training, we usually spend a large amount of time on the learning event itself. We also spend little time upfront to get the objectives right and little time after to ensure the skills transfer. The focus should be on creating the skills, knowledge and actions that ensure the key critical activities are done well by the team.

CONCLUSION

Confirmation bias and an organizational culture of training can drive global managers into the arms of cross-cultural training providers. An open attitude toward differences is more important than studying the behaviors that people may encounter. It is the openness to learning, rather than the knowledge itself, that should be the focus of training.

It is the responsibility of managers to avoid the cross-cultural training shortcut. By investigating the source of the issue, we model what we expect from our teams: Do the in-depth work before choosing a quick and obvious solution. 

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