

The RA Manager

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Training Design and Delivery Across Borders: Why 'One Size Fits All' Doesn't Work

Consider the Following Scenarios:

Kicking-Off in Germany. You are kicking off a two-day global quality assurance training at your company's German headquarters in Frankfurt. You decide to break the ice by telling the participants a short anecdote from a training session you did in France the week before. Your participants react with cold stares.

Problem-Solving in Japan. During a training program on global compliance issues in Tokyo you ask your Japanese participants to come up with ideas to increase global awareness of local compliance roadblocks. You tell them that they have 20 minutes to do a brainstorming session and that you will record their individual answers and ideas on the flip chart. When you repeat the instructions, the group just looks at you, but nobody seems to have any ideas or suggestions.

Action-Planning in France. You are about to complete your training on global project management at the French headquarters of your company in Paris. You want to move to the last item on the agenda: action-planning. The group is still engaged in lively discussions and doesn't seem to want to stop talking.



Why Worry About Cultural Differences When Delivering Training To Global Audiences?

Even if you are not a training or facilitation professional in the pharmaceutical industry, you have most likely been in situations where you were asked to present information to certain groups of people. When your audiences are from similar cultural backgrounds to your own you don't have to worry about the impact of your presentation, training program or facilitation. The concern about culture doesn't enter into your overall training approach. However, when your audience consists of people from a different culture or a variety of cultural backgrounds, the situation changes.

In the above-mentioned scenarios, the trainers/facilitators did not check their 'training toolkits,' but assumed that their program designs including activities and methodology would fit their international audiences. Their participants, though seemingly interested in the topic, were turned off, confused and/or plain unwilling to comply with the instructions given to them. Thus, the overall training effectiveness was questionable as was the value of the investment their companies made in sending foreign training professionals to their international locations around the world to train local employees.

The Role of Culture in the Training Room

Culture can be seen and defined in a myriad of ways: from 'the way we do things' to the 'way we are programmed.' A common way of looking at culture is to use the analogy of an iceberg, where only the tip (one-tenth) is visible and the bigger part (about nine-tenths) remains invisible, i.e., hidden beneath the waterline. The visible part of culture is the way people behave and act in certain situations. What remains hidden are the often unspoken and even unconscious values, attitudes and beliefs that drive these behaviors.

One of the pitfalls of working across cultures is that we often make assumptions about certain behaviors we observe without analyzing where they come from, i.e., which cultural preferences and beliefs influence and drive them. For example, the lack of questions, feedback and discussion after a presentation to a Chinese audience makes us think that the audience did not understand us. In reality, however, the audience doesn't ask any direct questions because there is a high value placed on saving face in the Chinese culture and asking too many questions might suggest that you, the presenter, did not do a good job of explaining your content.

How do Differences in Key Value Orientations Impact Training Design and Delivery across Cultures?

When looking at differences in cultural values and beliefs, it is helpful to view them on a continuum rather than from an “either/or” perspective. Intercultural researchers first developed the notion of cultural values being placed on a continuum to show that values are never right or wrong, but that people and cultures have different preferences regarding values. The value orientations that highly influence the design and delivery of training across cultures include the following:

Hierarchy vs. Egalitarianism. In many Asian cultures, there is a distinct power distance between the teacher/trainer/facilitator and their audience. Titles of respect such as ‘sensei’ (Japan) are given to the teacher/trainer figure who is traditionally treated with deference. These beliefs are based, to a certain extent, on a Confucian belief system that clearly determines everyone’s position in a hierarchy and can result in a more formal atmosphere in the classroom. However, in many Western cultures, especially in the US and Canada, the predominant belief is that people are created equal, which puts the trainer on the same level as everyone else with regard to prestige and status. A trainer’s credibility with his or her audience is based more on his or her actual performance in the classroom rather than on background and experience. Generally speaking, audiences in more egalitarian cultures prefer a more informal and relaxed tone and atmosphere rather than a formal one.

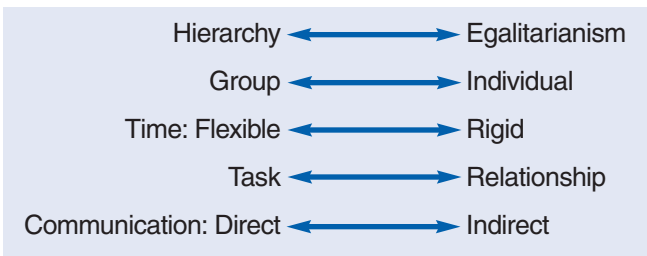
Individual vs. Group Orientation. Most Western cultures tend to place emphasis, first and foremost, on the individual rather than the group when it comes to making decisions or getting things done. Children are taught from an early age to be independent, think for themselves and make choices based on what’s best for them. In most Eastern cultures thinking about the welfare and the best interest of the group comes first, i.e., family, community, company, department or team. In the training room this plays itself out in terms of the level of participation, giving feedback including criticism and praise, decision-making and problem-solving. Participants from Western cultures tend to be comfortable with small group activities and even slightly competitive classroom environments where one group’s results (in a problem-solving activity) are compared and judged against the other groups’ findings. In Eastern cultures participants might be more used to collaborative and cooperative environments where the whole group is asked for feedback.

Concept of Time. The fact that time is viewed differently across cultures can lead to misunderstandings and roadblocks that are all too well-known in the global regulatory environment. What is considered ‘urgent’ and ‘in a timely manner’ can be viewed very differently by different cultures. What is considered a deadline in some cultures, i.e., something very rigid that should only be changed for very serious reasons, is viewed as flexible and is only a ‘guideline’ in other cultures where it can be discussed, stretched, extended, changed and even completely ignored. In training, these differences can influence the timing and pacing of the training process. Some audiences need more time to reflect, analyze and discuss the training content, while others are more comfortable with or even want a more accelerated pace. The difference in time concept also has an impact on very practical aspects such as scheduling break and lunch times as well as beginning and ending times of the training.

Task vs. Relationship Focus. The way to get tasks accomplished can also vary from culture to culture. Some cultures feel more comfortable building a relationship with their counterparts first before plunging into the actual task-solution phase. Others want to get down to business right away and consider it a waste of time doing anything other than focusing on the task at hand. In Latin cultures, for example, most people feel the need to know a certain amount of information about their counterparts’ personal background in order to feel comfortable and connected with them as human beings. In a training room with mostly Latin participants, the facilitator therefore has to allow more time for the icebreaking phase so that people feel like they are learning about each other and becoming familiar. In a US or German environment, on the other hand, participants will most likely get to the point rather



Figure 1. Key Value Orientations Impacting Training



quickly and don't care about getting to know their fellow participants. The training methodology and style can also be impacted by this value orientation: more task-focused cultures might initially prefer a more didactic program delivered in straight lecture style. Relationship-oriented cultures might be more comfortable with and accepting of experiential methods, including role plays and simulations where they get to interact with fellow participants.

Communication Style. Some cultures value directness and 'saying it straight.' People don't 'beat around the bush' and they tell you what they think when asked to give an opinion or make a decision. Such is the case with the US, much of Western Europe, Scandinavia, Australia and Israel. However, the majority of cultures worldwide place emphasis on saving face and maintaining a harmonious relationship within their immediate group. Therefore, a more indirect communication style is preferred where "yes" can express agreement or simply means, "I heard you." Most of Asia, Latin America, Southern Europe, the Arab world and most of Africa fall into this category. For the training room this means that facilitators have to be aware of, and perhaps even slightly modify, their style of expressing themselves when giving instructions and providing feedback to their participants. Reading audience reaction is very important with any group. However, this is an even bigger challenge with more indirect cultures where there might be very little visible reaction to training content and style.

What Questions Do We Need to Ask to Avoid Global Training Pitfalls?

In order to become aware of how you might need to adjust your training program to different cultural preferences in order to avoid pitfalls in the training room, included below is a list of key questions to ask as you prepare for your international training assignment. The questions have been divided according to the different elements and stages that any training program consists of.

- Needs Assessment
 - How are needs assessments viewed in the culture in which you are working? Who conducts them and

- who gets surveyed? Who arranges them?
- What format should they take? Written? Oral? How long? What questions are culturally appropriate?
- How do you deal with confidentiality? How open will people be? Who gets to see the answers?

- Design and Materials
 - What is the basic orientation towards training and learning in this culture?
 - How will differences in key cultural orientations impact your overall design with participants from this culture?
 - How will your specific design elements need to be modified/ adjusted to fit the culture's preferences? Content? Methodology? Training tools including media? Materials? Pacing?
- Delivery
 - What is the role of the trainer/ facilitator in the culture you are working with?
 - How do you build credibility and trust with the audience?
 - How do you maximize training effectiveness through out the day: Audience participation? Retention? Skill-building?
- Evaluation
 - How is training success measured in this culture? Using a formal evaluation process or an informal one or none?
 - What format should evaluations take? Written? Oral? Confidential? Open?
 - What happens with the evaluations? Who reads them? Is a formal report expected?

Let's Return to the Scenarios in Frankfurt, Tokyo and Paris

By not considering the influence of culture and cultural differences on the way people learn and take in information, our training professionals working in Frankfurt, Tokyo and Paris were less effective than they could have been.

Because of the focus on formality, status and hierarchy in the German culture, especially in the more traditional highly scientific pharmaceutical industry, it is very important to present yourself as a serious and very well-educated expert on your subject, highly qualified to talk about the topic at hand. This is especially important at the beginning of your program. Rather than telling an anecdote to break the ice, the audience would prefer to hear about your list of certifications, diplomas and degrees to be able to build the trust in you as the expert who is going to teach them something worthwhile.

Since the Japanese culture, in general, is highly group-ori-

ented as well as hierarchical, the idea of using the very individualistic and egalitarian approach of brainstorming where any participant is expected to just shout out ideas and suggestions regardless of their status, age and experience is a very foreign one. This approach might feel risky or even embarrassing to the group, and they will likely be reluctant to respond in this way. It would be much more effective to divide the group into two smaller groups and have these subgroups come up with suggestions that they then present—as a group—to the rest of the participants.

French participants in global training sessions are aware that these sessions often end with a list of action items that all participants agree to. A global training program is not considered productive unless there are some tangible outcomes at the end. How you arrive at these action items, however, can vary across cultures. Most US groups are comfortable with following a fairly rigid schedule and getting to the point quickly in order to maximize their time. In the French culture, on the other hand, time is seen as somewhat more fluid. It is more important to discuss all the pros and cons, the ins and outs and possible consequences of a decision being made rather than to wrap things up quickly. A trainer who pushes the audience to that point too quickly and does not allow enough time for discussion and debate will most likely be met with resistance.

Before you go off to foreign lands to conduct your training program, be sure to:

- Consider what impact culture and cultural differences might have on your training design and delivery;
- Go through your check-list of questions from beginning to end;
- Do your homework and learn as much as possible about the cultural preferences of the culture(s) you are working with; and

- Find someone from the culture to act as your informant or cultural advisor, ideally a local training professional; With the culturally appropriate tools in your tool box you will be a more effective and productive trainer who will be able to make meaningful connections with your audiences in Frankfurt, Tokyo and Paris—and elsewhere in the world.

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