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Intercultural Business Communication

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Cultural Shock

as language proficiency and overseas experience. Many recruiters think that tolerance can be developed but that adaptability is difficult to develop; they prefer, therefore, to hire persons who have already acquired this trait through living abroad (Geber, 1992; McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990). Adaptability screening reduces costly turnover. Harvey (1985) suggests the use of the following questions to determine a candidate's adaptability:

- Is the person cooperative, agreeable, and sensitive to others?
- Is the candidate open to the opinions of others?
- How does the person react to new situations, and what effort does he or she make to understand and appreciate differences?
- Does the candidate understand his or her own culturally derived values?
- Is the candidate sensitive and aware of the values of other cultures?
- How does the person react to criticism?
- How well does the candidate understand the U.S. government system?
- Will the candidate be able to make and develop contacts with counterparts in the foreign culture?
- Is the candidate patient when dealing with problem situations?
- Is the candidate resilient when faced with adverse situations?

By using such questions as these, interviewers are better able to determine a candidate's suitability for the overseas assignment as well as the person's motivation for wanting to work abroad.

The ability to see the environment from the perspective of the host nationals is an indication of empathy. Bennett's concept of empathy recommends replacing the Golden Rule "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" with the **Platinum Rule** "do unto others as they would have done unto them." You can still maintain your own cultural identity but be able to interpret the new culture through the eyes of the national (Broome, 1991).

Professional qualifications include knowledge of business practices in the host culture and technical competence. Some companies consider language skills crucial. When the destination is the Far East, many companies believe some language training prior to departure is needed. When the use of English is pervasive in a country, proficiency in the host language may not be necessary. In any case, language knowledge seems to give an expatriate an extra chance of succeeding in the host culture. In addition to language knowledge, understanding the educational, political, economic, and social systems of a country is considered important (Tung, 1981).

An individual's success or failure is tied to qualities such as self-efficacy, prior international experience, age, cross-cultural fluency, interpersonal skills, flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. **Self-efficacy** is an individual's self-image and confidence to adapt and function in a new environment. A sojourner's attitudes concerning personal safety, security, strength, and self-sufficiency correlate with a high self-efficacy. Bicultural individuals adapt better than monocultural individuals. Prior international experience is associated with a person's ability to adjust to a new culture. Bicultural people tend to be more cross-culturally fluent, culturally sensitive, and adaptable. Adaptive traits include anticipatory adjustments, psychological adjustments, and sociocultural adjustments. If what is anticipated actually happens, psychological uncertainty is reduced, so overlap between the two cultures can be very helpful in adaptation. The ability to understand new cultural behaviors, which is a personality characteristic, can reduce psychological adjustments. Sociocultural adjustments are helped if the host country people see the sojourner as a positive rather than a negative addition. Sociocultural training is very important to the success of this adaptation (Davis & Krapels, 2005).

Providing Predeparture Training for Host Country

An effective approach to cross-cultural training is to first explore how people adjust to new cultures. Learning principles that affect the success of training programs for global managers can be broken down into three steps: observing and emulating behaviors of persons in the host culture, retaining what has been learned, and experimenting with the new behavior until it becomes comfortable. For example, in the Philippines, social get-togethers are important in getting people of a company to feel comfortable together and to develop camaraderie that spills over into the workplace. These festive occasions, which often include cooking together, singing, dancing, and storytelling, serve an important function in employer/employee relations. Attending and participating are important; those who do not participate are viewed as cold and aloof. After observing such social events, U.S. managers who want to be successful in the host culture would then sponsor similar social outings to demonstrate their desire to become part of the new culture (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992).

Because of the reported lack of intercultural training by U.S. multinational companies, acculturation problems have affected the overall success rate of businesspersons in foreign countries. Research conducted by Krapels (1993) involving 102 international businesspersons representing 35 international Mid-South companies determined that 46% of the firms participating offered some type of predeparture training; however, only one firm had a formal training program in place. Because early return rates drop significantly when training programs are implemented, many multinational firms are now experimenting with a variety of training programs. Some companies are trying to boost tolerance of another culture by including trainees from overseas locations in their U.S.-based training programs. Other firms conduct training sessions overseas and send U.S. managers to these courses to provide training in the host culture at the same time that some exposure to the culture occurs. Still other companies incorporate cross-cultural awareness into their regular management training courses.

Advances in communication technology are now being used in intercultural training. For example, a major international firm uses global videoconferencing to train employees and their families at more than 200 sites around the world. Global educational networks with various universities are being developed to train executives who are going abroad. Computers are being used to enhance training effectiveness. Computer-aided training or learning has immense potential for multicultural education because it cuts across traditional language barriers (Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2011). Research indicates that such instruction not only encourages one-to-one learning but can save 30% of the time of more traditional methods. Regardless of the type of training offered, companies realize that success is limited to the extent that there is no substitute for actually living in another culture.

Approaches to intercultural training may be grouped as follows:

- The **intellectual model** is also called the classroom model. Participants are given facts about the host country using a variety of instructional methods, such as lectures, group discussions, and videotapes. This model, which is used most frequently, is based on the belief that cognitive understanding is necessary for performing effectively abroad. This training method is popular in the military as well as in business and educational institutions. Reasons for the popularity of the intellectual model are that staffing is relatively easy and participants are familiar with this approach. A limitation of this approach is that the knowledge gained may not coincide with what is actually needed when a person lives abroad. In other words, the person has learned facts and generalizations about the culture that do not take into account everyday happenings that the person experiences when living in the culture. The model teaches for knowledge and is not based on experience; it does not develop problem-solving skills or flexible attitudes.

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- The **area training model**, also called the simulation model, emphasizes affective goals, culture-specific content, and experiential processes. This approach is centered on the trainee rather than the trainer, requires trainee involvement in the learning process, and emphasizes problem solving rather than acquiring information. Through field trips or such simulations as Bafa Bafa (in which participants are divided into two cultures, Alpha and Beta), trainees learn the rules of their culture and interact with members of the other culture. Critics of this approach point out that because it is a simulation, this type of training may still be dissimilar from the actual experience abroad. In addition, those who desire to have more knowledge about the culture (the focus of the intellectual model) would consider the dissimilarity from reality a drawback of this approach.
- The **self-awareness model**, also called the human relations model, is based on the assumption that the trainee with self-understanding will adapt to the new culture better and will therefore be more effective in the overseas assignment. To accomplish desired outcomes, trainers use role play or the sensitivity or Training (T-) Group approach. The **sensitivity training**, or **T-Group**, movement, popular in the late 1960s and 1970s, has not received much attention in recent years. This approach involved training exercises in which people are told in a group setting by others why their behavior is inappropriate, such as that they are perceived as arrogant, dogmatic, or judgmental. This training approach was controversial at best. Although some may have perceived the feedback as helpful, others were uncomfortable exploring their feelings and emotions and viewed it as threatening. Some critics of this approach point out that the American T-Group is based on U.S. values of directness, openness, and equality. Further, this approach does not give participants a framework of conceptual knowledge for analyzing future situations. In addition, cultural relativity and differences in values are not addressed.
- The **cultural awareness model** emphasizes cultural insight, and like the self-awareness model, stresses affective goals and an experiential process. In this approach, participants go from recognizing their own values to contrasting their values with those of other cultures using a variety of techniques, including realistic role-playing. This approach, although not as familiar to trainees as the intellectual approach, more nearly approximates interactions participants would experience in the new culture (Moran et al., 2011).
- The **interaction approach** is based on participants' interacting with people in the host country, either nationals or U.S. persons who have been in the host country for an extended time (Moran et al., 2011).
- The **multidimensional approach** is based on the concept that using any single training approach is not as effective as using an approach that attempts to combine cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of training. Critics of this approach say that integrating approaches is overly ambitious. However, advocates maintain that the integrated approach, balancing content with process, affective learning with cognitive, and culture specific with culture general, will better prepare participants for a successful overseas experience (Bennett, 1986).

Providing Feedback and Rewards

Global managers need feedback and rewards just as managers in the home culture do. The appraisal and reward system is different from the home system because people in overseas assignments have to be evaluated and rewarded in a way that takes into account the values of persons in the host culture and the expectations of the particular assignment. The evaluation criteria must be made clear. Areas typically included are leadership ability, interpersonal skills, negotiation skills, customer service, communication skills, and achievement of organizational objectives. For international managers, a key factor to be evaluated often includes profits, but in some countries, the main goal might be

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to build a presence in the country. In that case, making contacts and building close personal relationships with key officials in the host country are important. Another consideration in appraising overseas managers is who should do the evaluating. Many companies use a rating team headed by a senior human resources management executive. Persons who may be involved in the appraisal process include on-site superiors, peer managers, subordinates, and clients. The team leader might be expected to prepare an appraisal on the global manager every six months (Black et al., 1992).

Reward systems for global managers include special allowances for housing/utilities/furnishings, cost of living, hardship, education, home leave, relocation, medical, car and driver, club memberships, and taxes. The main objective of whatever reward system is used is to attract and retain quality employees. Rewards are especially important in overseas assignments because employees need to be compensated for what they are leaving behind: favorite foods, recreation, family and friends, educational opportunities, and health care. In addition, reward systems used for global managers need to take into consideration the idea of equity—the ratio between what they contribute and what they receive. A manager in the host country who is supposed to be on the same level as the U.S. manager often sees a disparity between what the two contribute and receive; this situation can cause friction and add to feelings of inequity between expatriate managers and local managers. Managers/government employees from the same country but not the same company/government agency also can experience feelings of dissatisfaction based on equity. One spouse of a U.S. expatriate complained that her husband's firm did everything "on the cheap," including housing allowances, bonuses, and home-leave airfares (economy class only), while their friends in other companies received higher housing allowances and bonuses and flew business class (Black et al., 1992).

Developing Employees to Their Maximum Potential

In the past, insufficient attention has been given to reacclimating global managers, specifically in planning for the return of managers who have been in foreign posts for some time. As a result, many managers become dissatisfied with their positions upon their return to their U.S. firm and leave the company. In fact, an estimated 20% of managers leave the firm within a year following repatriation. When you consider the firm's investment in the success of its global managers, the importance of focusing on repatriation becomes clear. Plans for successful repatriation adjustment should begin before the manager leaves the host country; the company should make clear the reason for the new assignment, what new skills and knowledge will be learned, and how the employee will contribute to the company's development upon his or her return. In addition, human resources department personnel should begin initial preparations for the manager's return at least six months prior to repatriation by providing home-country information and contacts. Other recommendations for successful repatriation include providing appropriate compensation for transition expenses, allowing sufficient time to move and get settled before reporting to work, assisting in the location of proper housing, and showing appreciation to the entire family for their contributions to the company during their overseas assignment (Black et al., 1992).

A U.S. expatriate made this observation on returning to his home in Dallas from an assignment in Caracas:

I was really looking forward to coming home, but now I don't feel like I belong. Before I left, I had a large corner office in my company; now I share an office with two other managers. Most people don't even know who I am. My wife isn't happy. In Caracas, our life was very social; we were invited to all the best parties. She had a cook, maid, seamstress, gardener, and nanny. Here she has no friends and no household help.

ASPECTS OF CULTURAL SHOCK

Aspects of cultural shock include cultural stress, social alienation, social class and poverty/wealth extremes, financial matters, and relationships and family considerations. In addition, differences between the extent to which persons in the host and home cultures reveal their private selves may cause acculturation problems, particularly in communication.

Cultural Stress

Entering an unfamiliar culture is stressful; in fact, transitions of any type are both psychologically and physically stressful. The stress of getting ready for the move, of unpacking and getting settled upon arrival, and of adjusting to new foods can be so stressful that people become physically ill. Problems with housing, climate, services, or communication in another language bring additional stress.

Expatriates learn to use a variety of coping skills to alleviate stress. Unfortunately, some coping behaviors are negative. Taking drugs or drinking alcohol may provide a temporary superficial relief to the stressful situation but avoids dealing with the real source of stress. Another negative coping method, using food to alleviate stress, may create weight-gain problems. Positive techniques include diversions such as taking up a hobby or learning a new skill, planning family events, sharing problems with friends and family members, and changing one's mental outlook. Physical coping mechanisms, such as exercise and meditation, are useful in alleviating stress, as are spiritual techniques such as volunteering to help others and religious worship.

Some companies have found that providing prospective expatriates with a mentor who has worked in the host country can help reduce anxiety about adjustments that may be necessary in the new culture. Providing a second mentor located in the host country can reduce stress associated with learning acceptable behavior in the new culture and help avoid serious business and social blunders.

To alleviate culture stress, prepare for the second culture by reading up on the country, studying the language, and becoming aware of customs and traditions in the culture. Maintaining a sense of humor is very important in dealing with cultural stress.

Social Alienation

An aspect of cultural shock that can have adverse effects upon the newcomer to a culture is social alienation and the feelings of loneliness associated with being isolated from friends and the home culture. Feelings of alienation may be delayed somewhat because concern over such basic matters as housing, transportation, and work may buffer these feelings initially. As the months pass, however, you may feel more isolated as you experience numerous cultural differences, such as what is considered an appropriate topic of social conversation. The concern of people in the United States with fitness, exercise, and healthful eating is not shared by persons of many cultures; such topics, therefore, are inappropriate for conversation. You may also feel uncomfortable during political discussions because persons of other cultures cannot understand the logic behind such decisions as voting for a presidential candidate who is inexperienced in the international arena rather than for a seasoned politician who is respected in the international community.

Making an effort to become familiar with the nuances of the culture and cultivating friendships with persons from the home culture as well as the host culture can alleviate feelings of alienation. Enrolling in language classes and including host nationals in social events can cushion the shock of the new culture and pave the way toward a better understanding and appreciation of the people and their culture.