

Interpersonal Skills in an Intercultural World

BY MAUREEN RABOTIN

In preparing for an international assignment, a one- or two-day training seminar only goes so far in helping an assignee re-evaluate and redevelop deeply ingrained cultural assumptions. Rabotin delves into the nature of ethnocentrism and discusses the importance of expatriate coaching beyond intercultural training classes.





We have heard it a million different times from a million different people reassuring us in the face of a million different situations: “Just be yourself and everything will be fine.”

However, if you have ever uttered that phrase to reassure a colleague, friend, or family member as he or she embarked on his or her first international assignment, you were wrong.

It is human nature to suffer from ethnocentrism. And when we tell that future expatriate to just be him- or herself, what we most often forget is that the notion of “being yourself” comes from having a U.S. perspective, and may not work in countries that operate under a completely different paradigm.

So, what is a future expatriate to do? How does one learn the new paradigm? How does the international assignee open him- or herself up to discovering a completely different way of interacting?

Questioning the Answer

More often than not, the exciting international assignment starts with a rather dull questionnaire. The corporation’s human resource department requests and signs an agreement for measurable, repeatable, and uniform trainings from a chosen external consulting firm. The engaged firm then will send out a standardized needs assessment or pre-training questionnaire that often includes the following:

- Which strengths do you think will enable you to succeed in your new international assignment?
- What do you want to learn during this training to enable you to be successful in your new assignment?

In my more-than-decade-long experience as a cross-cultural trainer, the answers to the first question vary little and fall under a basic cultural assumption found within most of us born and raised in the United States: “I’m friendly, informal, and get along with most anyone.”

This answer, while seemingly benign, raises a red flag—and more questions.

It is not to say that being charismatic is an unappreciated personality trait when meeting new people or finding your bearings in unfamiliar environments. The ability to put people at ease and draw on every human being’s desire to be accepted and recognized for who they are is definitely a plus when it comes to melting the ice. Please note the use of “melting the ice” as opposed to “breaking the ice,” which often is considered imposing and even arrogant by people raised in a protocol-driven, status-oriented culture.

A European once said, “When I hear that expression, I imagine somebody rushing up to me

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with an ice pick and chipping away at my frosty or formal protective behavior. I don’t know these people in this new merger, and now I must like them immediately by doing some informal team-building, ice-breaking activity? Who do they think I am?”

Being informal also can be misinterpreted as being disrespectful—something all cultures abhor. Despite the many differences, humans around the globe feel the need for respect in both personal and professional environments. This need especially is strong in the expatriate who, on entering a new world, will experience:

- a loss of identity—not being recognized for who he or she is; and
- a loss of direction—not having his or her bearings.

Because of these feelings of loss, and the innate human need for respect, employees preparing to live and work abroad express the desire to learn what it means to be polite in the country of destination and how to avoid making cultural mistakes. In fact, these are the two most common requests by executives in primary expatriate training programs.

With the desire to learn how not to “mess up” in a different culture, more questions are raised and an interesting discovery begins. After all, to know what might be considered impolite or a “mistake” in another country, the future expatriate has to delve into his or her basic cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values.

The Science Behind Ethnocentrism

A one- or two-day training course can explain why the expatriate will experience a sense of loss, but in no way, shape, or form can pre-departure trainings prepare the person for his or her reactions to his or her expectations. Just as the placebo effect will influence expectations, received ideas will do the same. In superficially learning about the cultural characteristics of a country, the expatriate comes to expect or stereotype certain behaviors on arrival.

Today, neuroscience has proven what we long assumed about how the brain functions. The idea that we can tell a person something once and he or she can understand or apply it instantly simply is not true. Thus, two-day trainings are ineffective when a comprehensive perspective shift is the end goal. As an adult, our neural hardwiring has been functioning a certain way for a number of years. The sense of disorientation we experience in a foreign environment is a physical experience of not yet having formed the neural pathways that allow ourselves to feel at home in this new place.

Another common pre-training question is, “Have you lived in other foreign countries prior to this assignment?” The answer to this question tells the trainer how hard the neural networks are embedded in the future expatriate’s brain. Has he or she been



required to develop new neural pathways recently? How developed is his or her neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life?

Frequent flyer miles or one-week resort vacations in foreign countries do not equal new neural connectivity; living, breathing, and finding one's way around does. Neural connections only can be built through a voluntary focusing on wanting to learn something. When people find answers to questions on their own, the "aha" feeling is the reaction as the brain releases a massive dose of neurotransmitters such as adrenaline.

So, if a short-lived training session cannot do what it promises, what is the alternative? How can we speed up the development of those necessary neural pathways? How can we avoid reinforcing stereotypes?

Training Versus Coaching

Coaching is a conversation with the purpose of raising awareness, increasing listening skills, and empowering self-reflection in a secure environment. It can be effective when the client voluntarily commits to the coaching process. When the client chooses a coach whose background, experience, and personal qualities are in rapport with his or her wishes, the coaching engagement will result in a structured and interactive process based on achieving specific goals.

Compared to coaching, training is a one- or two-day quick fix. Training involves lecturing and providing solutions. Effective coaches enable their clients to work out solutions on their own resulting in the "aha!" feeling that signals the beginnings of

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new neural connections. Coaching is a journey of continuous improvement based on various researched methodologies, such as GROW—clients defining *goals*, determining how *realistic* they are, focusing on *options*, and the *will* to generate the actions required to achieve these commitments.

Knowing that international assignments can easily cost a company 10 times an employee's salary, preparing the expatriate correctly becomes a minor investment when compared to the cost of a failed assignment, a premature repatriation, or the company losing a talented, high-potential executive to a competitor.

As "People First" author Jack Lannon said, "If you want your profits to grow, you must grow people first."

Eureka! — In Small Doses, Over time

At many training programs, we all have had that "Eureka!" feeling of learning new and exciting ways of doing things, only to later realize that we cannot remember what we had learned. Our first reaction may

be: is it me or are the ideas just not applicable to my situation?

Research has shown us that many small bites of knowledge, digested over time, may be more efficient than large meals of methodologies. A 1997 study of 31 public-sector managers, "Executive Coaching as a Transfer of Training Tool: Effects on Productivity in a Public Agency," by researchers Gerald Olivero, K. Denise Bane, and Richard E. Kopelman from Baruch College at the City University of New York, NY, found that a training program alone increased productivity 28 percent, but the addition of follow-up coaching to the training increased productivity 88 percent. Initial training with small, consistent doses of coaching seems to be the most effective way to successfully prepare the expatriate. Coaching helps the assignee avoid backsliding or leaving the trained notions unpacked or back at home.

Ask any person going through a transition the most useful thing a company could provide, the most common response is: "Someone to call on to help me through this phase."

This response is proof that the theory behind coaching works: if you give the expatriate someone to talk to—someone who will listen—it can have a positive effect on productivity and innovation, as well as leadership and team effectiveness.

Learning to live, work, and thrive abroad is complex because as humans we are complex. As adults, we have fully formed communication styles, interpersonal skills, and perceptions. So, when we are asked to examine and, in some cases, redevelop these skills in different ways, it is challenging. That is why under-



standing the science behind how we learn and remember, and the research behind training and coaching, is so useful.

When looking at the bottom line, the key to return on investment is through investing in both training and a coaching program. A one-day pre-departure training seminar will help the expatriate get a better understanding of the historical and contemporary events that have affected the people and the country to which he or she is assigned, and also will provide practical information pertaining to public transportation, safety issues, child care, and housing. Follow-up with expatriate coaching then becomes essential as the international assignee experiences the U-curve adaptation period while the brain develops new neural pathways.

The long-lasting “aha” feeling belongs to the culturally sensitive, reflective, adaptable, and productive assignee. ■

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