

"Global Effectiveness:" A vital competency

- by Jack Keogh

Over the past several years I have delivered presentations and workshops around the general themes of "Global Effectiveness" and "The impact of culture on business". These are presentations to corporate audiences quite separate from the intercultural training offered to expatriates. The topics seem relevant for reasons that include:

1. Culture is not something we deal with or think about until we have to go out of our cultural comfort zone.
2. Because business is global, managers, especially senior management, realize they - and their organization - need to develop a "global mindset".
3. Surveys and lots of anecdotic evidence, suggest that many of us, especially in the US, have a poor understanding of geo-politics not to mention cultural differences.
4. Managers who have no experience of living outside their native culture can be somewhat intimidated at having to conduct business with people and teams from cultures different to their own.
5. The experience of managing expatriates or of being expatriated is quite daunting for people who may have had little prior international exposure.

A related topic that has been very popular is "How to Develop a Global Mindset". It is of special interest to newly promoted managers in multinational organizations. The theme is also relevant to sales and marketing professionals who sell to the different ethnic groups in the United States as they endeavor to reach this great "untapped market". Indeed this latter group, as a result of the presentations, has requested specific follow-up workshops on "cross-cultural real estate sales" .

The presentations and workshops mentioned above are an introduction to more formal cross-cultural training. They are designed to encourage attendees to become culturally literate. Invariably, someone in the audience will ask a question like: "is it really possible to improve cultural competence with just a few classes or by taking an on-line course"? My answer, of course is a qualified "no". No doubt that cross-cultural training will raise awareness of differences and provide tools and techniques for helping to bridge the differences and facilitate communication by generating mutual understanding. But is this enough?

Why cultural briefings are not enough

Cultural briefings, consisting mostly of information "dumps" and pointers on etiquette, can be helpful for leisure travel but they are certainly not sufficient for cross-cultural business effectiveness. Having been privileged to live and work in six different countries, I am a firm believer that it is not enough to learn "facts" about other countries and cultures. We need to understand the "deeper" underlying culture.

Despite this, much of what goes by the name of cross-cultural training today is designed to provide cultural "information" to individuals who may be working with people from different cultures. In addition to the standard, factual information dump, training often includes a description of contrasting cultural "dimensions" (for instance: the US is described as an "individualistic" culture, where the individual reigns supreme vs. Mexico or Japan which are "group oriented" cultures). This can be a helpful and necessary way to acquire a cognitive understanding of the "other" culture but it can also lead to inaccurate and misleading stereotypes which do not help foster cultural acceptance.

Another important element is often overlooked in cultural training. Our ability to manage across cultures requires a substantial use of what we call “emotional intelligence”. We now have strong, empirical data which allows us to measure, describe and train emotional intelligence in ways that are meaningful for cross-cultural adaptation. Hence, in an economy as global as the one we live and work in, where we are constantly bombarded with factual and technical information, it is time to reevaluate how we prepare ourselves and our teams for vital cross-cultural business interaction. Is it enough to learn “factual” information or do we need to learn to change our behavior?

Cultural training and behavior modification

Do we honestly think that a one or, at most, two day cultural training course is going to produce the behavioral changes that are necessary for genuine cross-cultural adaptation? Those going abroad will benefit from pre-departure training which will give them an overview of the new culture and help prepare them to deal with the challenging reality of “culture shock”. (“Culture shock”, by the way is something of a misnomer – a “shock”, to my way of thinking, suggests an event which happens in a very reduced time-frame from which we recover quickly. What we mean by “culture shock” is a minor state of depression that can last up to 10 weeks, post arrival at the new location, and is prone to reoccurrence).

Post-arrival training, when the brief “honeymoon” period is wearing down, is very necessary. To be truly relevant and useful, this cross-cultural training must deal with the aspects of emotional adjustment which are especially vital for the adaptation of the accompanying spouse. We must ensure that measurable outcomes are incorporated into the training curriculum and that the sojourners are given practical advice on setting up their “emotional” networks. I suggest that “emotional management” (in the “scientific” acceptance of the terms) is emerging as a major key to success in the global marketplace. Interestingly, we do not learn emotional intelligence from CD-ROMs or from books. We learn it from our mothers, from our teachers, coaches and (if we are very lucky) bosses. What more should we add to ensure that the training is truly cost-effective and productive?

To achieve sustainable results, effective cross-cultural training should include on-going coaching

Acquiring the competencies to be an effective cross-cultural business communicator is a “process”, not an “event”. We become internationalists by learning from our mistakes, by learning to be more accepting and flexible by acquiring a profound respect for the differences that separate us. Cross-cultural management coaching, delivered periodically by phone and e-mail, one-on-one, during the first months of the assignment, is the factor that will help ensure enduring success. On-going coaching from an experienced, knowledgeable and caring professional will help ensure that the cultural understanding, acquired in the class-room training, will become a transformational reality in the daily work life of the person being coached. Having the opportunity to serve as a coach to clients engaged in cross-border business, is an extremely rewarding aspect of my new life as consultant. It helps transform the training “event” into a life-changing “process”.

If you agree that human capital is vital to organizational success and you are committed to developing a global mindset in your workforce, I would like to suggest you consider inviting your cultural development trainers and providers to incorporate some of the ideas that we have mentioned. Specifically:

- defining measurable learning goals

- incorporating specific modules to teach the emotional skills needed for cross-cultural effectiveness
- seeking behavioral modification if necessary
- a vision of cross-cultural training as a process rather than an isolated event
- identification and assessment of candidates that would benefit from executive coaching

Which brings me to a final question: will individuals who have developed global understanding and cultural competencies thrive in an organization that does not possess a "global mindset"? Will we be able to retain them? Will they help us win the war for talent?

Strategic opportunity for HR professionals

It is almost impossible for employees to cultivate a global mindset - or for the organization's leaders to acquire global skills - unless the culture of the organization itself is imbued with global effectiveness thinking, skills and behaviors.

At a time when business process outsourcing should be liberating us to focus on strategic rather than tactical issues, it is good to remind ourselves that developing organizational global effectiveness may be one of the most important contributions that HR professionals can make, if we are to have, or retain, a "seat at the table" in shaping corporate strategy.

Organizations devoid of a global way of thinking will not fare well in the international arena. Because human capital is the defining competitive differentiator of most organizations, our commitment to the task of attracting, retaining and managing the best talent available is our major strategic challenge.