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New Developments in Intercultural Management Training

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Over the past two decades intercultural management training has truly flourished. Due to the work of Hofstede (1980/2001, 1991), Trompenaars (1993), and Adler (1991), culture remained no longer a notion of interest mainly to anthropologists but instead made its entry into the field of management development.

An important reason for this shift was the reduction of data, of which Hofstede's work is the earliest and most widely cited example. Using results from a study on work-related values in more than 50 countries, Hofstede showed that there were country-specific response patterns, which could be explained by assuming that cultures differed along just a few dimensions, for example, Power Distance and Individualism/Collectivism. This approach made it possible to compare countries on the basis of their respective positions on each dimension, and did away with the need of paying attention to the numerous facets and peculiarities of one country after another. The focus thus shifted to how high a country scored on Power Distance, or how individualistic it was, and different positions on a given dimension could be translated into systematic implications for the workplace. Trompenaars (1993) likewise used a small number of dimensions to explain differences between cultures, and spelled out very clearly the implications of different positions on these dimensions for cooperating and negotiating across cultural boundaries. Adler (1991) showed how culture affected different organizational functions. Based on the work of these and other authors, practical training modules and consulting approaches were developed to help members of international companies understand the challenge of working in a multicultural work environment.

The wave of cross border mergers and acquisitions especially in the second half of the Nineties further contributed to the success of the intercultural management field.¹ In the process, new models for capturing cultural differences have been proposed (e.g., Laurent, 1983; Schwartz, 1994, and the recent GLOBE project), and many hybrid models are being used in which individual trainers and consultants combine Hofstede's, Trompenaars' and other people's dimensions according to their personal insights, experiences and preferences. When you now search for "Intercultural consultancy" on the Internet, you will be presented with 9,760 hits; a keyword like "Intercultural management" delivers 147,000 results and "Intercultural training" even yields 158,000 links (Google.com; July 2003).

In sum, more than 20 years after Hofstede's (1980) groundbreaking publication, there is a sea of information about culture and cultural differences, and navigational support nearby through books like "The cross cultural buyer's guide" (Wederspahn, 2000).

However, this wealth of information does not by itself help companies to answer one of their burning questions: How can we make all of this relevant to our organization such that it leads to concrete changes in behaviour? How can our people use this

information to improve their competences in leading, coaching and motivating others, and communicating and negotiating with them, in and for an intercultural context?

With such key questions being left unanswered, decision-makers may have begun to wonder whether their investments into intercultural management training have been worth their money. First, as with many training programs, it is certainly hard to measure the success of intercultural management training. Learning to deal with the challenges of an intercultural business environment does not happen overnight but is instead a long-term process. Happiness sheets at the end of a workshop may produce great evaluations for an inspiring and engaging trainer and ensure a follow-up contract, but these evaluations need not indicate enhanced cross-cultural adjustment and effectiveness in the long run (see Mayer, 2003, who shows that management trainers receiving moderate feedback brought about better long term effects than management trainers receiving enthusiastic feedback.)

Second, at times, intercultural management training may have had detrimental effects on people's ability to work effectively with business partners from other cultures. If people are

¹ See Economic Trends, 2000, Supplement A, No 5/6: "Mergers and acquisitions. Summary and main points." http://europa.eu.int/comm/economy_finance/publications/european_economy/2000/a2000_0506_en.pdf



confronted with cultural differences when they are not ready to deal with differences, they are likely to simply use the information to conclude that they were right all along about the Swiss (for example) – but that it is now scientifically proven. They are especially likely to seek confirmation of their stereotypes when they are under stress and don't feel safe (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; van der Zee, 2002), as is so typically the case in a post-merger phase. At such times, the focus should be on *similarities in values* and *differences in competences between the groups* involved, as well as on *individual differences within each group* (Bennett, 1993; van Oudenhoven & de Boer, 1995).

Confronting people with cultural differences in the typical intense 2-day training workshop without paying attention to their likely attitude toward other cultures (influenced in part by their current work situation); and without taking into account their individual ability to deal with the issues raised, is likely to be counter-productive. A wealth of knowledge about other cultures is not in itself sufficient for helping people become more motivated, satisfied and effective in their intercultural workplace.

Culture is not a cold topic, allowing people to lean back and consume the information given. Instead, it is a very personal subject, raising questions like *Should we adapt to them? And if so, why? What does this say about our position?*

Culture is a hot topic, touching upon issues of power and social identity, and individual differences need to be taken into account in order to help people to adjust to, and perform effectively in an intercultural work environment.

Companies now know that culture is an issue. They do know that they can only succeed with people who have an international mindset and who have expanded their behavioural repertoire accordingly. But how, given the wealth of models, suppliers and options, can they select the right program to develop the right competencies in their people? A re-orientation of the field is called for.

A new approach to intercultural management training: Building Intercultural Competence

Focussing on the learner

We believe that a new approach to intercultural management training should focus on the learner rather than on a given model of culture. A focus on the learner is needed if we want to achieve long term and positive learning effects, and enable people to apply what they've learned to new and complex business contexts, i.e., to continue learning after the intervention. A learner-focussed approach should take stock of how individual learners currently deal with cultural differences, what they need to develop given their role in the organization, encourage them



to take responsibility of their development, and, last but not least, make their progress measurable.

Sustaining interaction

Secondly, a new approach should focus on developing individuals' ability to sustain interaction (Michael H. Bond, personal communication) with people from other cultural groups. Some interactions may be short-term with a wide variety of people (e.g., complaint handling on the phone, customer service during a flight); others may be long-term and always involve the same individuals. In this latter case, sustaining interaction means being able to *establish and maintain relationships* across cultural boundaries. Being able to build relationships is of particular importance as it helps to keep cultural knowledge up-to-date, gain a deeper understanding of the culture-specifics of the particular business situation, and develop creative solutions that meet a variety of business demands (see Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000, for the role of creative reconciliation of different cultural values). Strong relationships are the key to continuous learning in the international business arena.

Building intercultural competences

A joint focus on learners and their ability to sustain interaction can be achieved only by concentrating on how we can help them develop their intercultural competences. Most generally, a competence is “an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job” (Boyatzis, 1982).

More specifically, competencies are “abilities to engage in cognitive activities that enhance adaptive functioning in face of a complex and unpredictable job environment” (Kanungo & Misra, 1992, p. 1323). This distinguishes them from skills, which are “abilities to engage in an overt behaviour to handle a routine job” (Kanungo and Misra, *ibid.*).

We will take a close look at three approaches to intercultural competence, which all have in common that they offer tools to assess current levels of competence. They differ in what is assessed and how much time it takes to further develop the competences at issue. Our selection of approaches is not exhaustive, and so, in the last section, we will outline some guidelines for deciding which intercultural competences are needed. We hope that this outline will be useful in evaluating the approaches to intercultural competences discussed here as well as those that we do not discuss.

Attitudes toward other cultural groups

Milton Bennett was one of the first advocates of a learner-focussed approach to intercultural training (Bennett, 1993). In their early work with US American exchange students, he and Janet Bennett analysed the students' responses to the things happening to them when abroad. Sometimes, the situations that occurred were very much alike, but the students' responses to these events differed remarkably. When comparing these responses, Bennett and Bennett



discovered a pattern: The responses fell into distinct categories that seemed to reflect a growing ability to absorb cultural differences in a constructive way. Milton Bennett (1993) called this learning process the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

According to Bennett, the development proceeds along 6 stages. The first 3 stages reflect an ethnocentric approach to differences: Denial (inability to construe cultural difference), Defence (recognition and mainly negative evaluation of difference) and Minimization (recognition and acceptance of superficial differences). The 3 ethno-relative stages are Acceptance (appreciation of difference in behaviour and values), Adaptation (the ability to shift frame of reference, and ability to communicate accordingly) and Integration of Difference (internalisation of bicultural or multicultural frames of reference). The major step is the one from ethnocentric to ethno-relative attitudes, i.e., the step from using one's own cultural frame of reference to evaluate what is good and bad, normal and deviant, to seeing one's own cultural frame of reference as just one of several equally valid ways of looking at the world and responding to it.

Depending on the stage a learner is in, different training modules – in terms of training content and process – are required to support development to the next stage (J.M. Bennett & M.J. Bennett, 1998). Learners in Denial should be invited to explore the implications of differences they already know of (e.g., language

differences and their consequences for how people address each other) and to introduce new differences they can accept quite easily (e.g., history and economics; Do's and taboos). People in Defence should not be confronted with more discussions of differences; instead the focus should be on similarities between people, and on shared goals (e.g., through team building activities). For people in Minimization (who still underestimate the impact of their own culture on themselves), the step is to improve their perceptual acuity (so that they continue to learn and explore) and help them develop cultural self-awareness. The rationale is that they can only respect other cultures' ways of thinking and behaving if they understand how they themselves have been influenced by their own culture. Learners in ethno-relative stages are ready to deal with models of cultures like those of Hofstede and Trompenaars, and to get engaged in challenging interventions that allow them to explore the impact of cultural differences on negotiating, leadership styles etc.

To assess current stages of learners, Hammer and M.J. Bennett (1998; 2003) developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; see Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 1999, for a discussion of the initial version of the IDI, and Brinkmann & van der Zee, 1999, for country-specific tendencies toward a given stage). Results on the IDI can then be used to plan and implement the right approach so as to maximize developmental.



Bennett's developmental model provides a very clear learner focus. His insights must be taken into account by any intercultural consultant, and also by staff members responsible for initiating and deciding about intercultural training interventions.

The DMIS describes the development of increasingly constructive attitudes toward other cultural groups and their culture-specific frames of reference. The link between such attitudes and concrete behaviour is, however, only indirect. Culture-specific knowledge and the training of specific behaviours are required in order for people to adapt to and perform effectively in the relevant intercultural work settings. For example, a person may have developed ethno-relative attitudes through studying abroad in one particular country; however, he or she may still have to learn how to manage and negotiate with business partners from this and other cultures.

In sum, the DMIS provides key guidelines for developing intercultural training initiatives. But it does not specify intercultural competences that are clearly linked to concrete work behaviours such as communicating, negotiating, and managing. Additional concepts are needed for a comprehensive intercultural competence approach.

The multicultural personality

Combining the strengths of cross-cultural and personality psychology, two researchers from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, Jan-Pieter van Oudenhoven and Karen van der Zee, developed a framework for analysing the success factors of one of the most challenging intercultural work environments, i.e., expatriate assignments. Based on a comprehensive analysis of earlier studies and own empirical work, they arrived at 5 dimensions of personality as being relevant for adjustment and performance of expatriates:

Cultural Empathy: Being able to

empathize with the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of members from different cultural groups

Flexibility: Being able to switch easily from

one strategy to another, and feeling attracted to new and unknown situations

Open-mindedness: Being open and

unprejudiced towards out-group members and toward different cultural norms and values

Social Initiative: Being inclined to actively

approach social situations and to take the initiative

Emotional Stability: Remaining calm in

stressful situations



To assess these dimensions and test their relevance for working abroad, van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000) developed the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). By now, a number of studies have shown that the 5 dimensions do indeed matter for both students and business people working abroad, especially when it comes to their psychological and social well-being, that is, their adjustment to the new environment (Mol, van Oudenhoven and van der Zee, 2001; van Oudenhoven and van der Zee, 2002. See also Deller, 2000, on the role of personality in expatriate assignments, and Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2002, for an overview of research in this area). With a tool like the MPQ, researchers can now also address and answer more specific questions about success factors in expatriate assignments. Thus, Wiersinga (2003) shows that the 5 personality dimensions may differ in importance, depending on where the assignment takes place, and van der Zee, Atsma and Brodbeck (2003) use the MPQ to analyze the role of personality in diverse teams. They found that team members who are highly flexible and emotionally stable could better deal with ethnic diversity in teams. Interestingly, highly flexible individuals seem to need diversity – their performance dropped in homogenous teams.

These are just a few examples of how a clearly focussed intercultural competence approach, backed up by valid and reliable assessment tools, can dramatically enhance our

understanding of success factors in extremely complex and dynamic intercultural work situations.

In sum, the approach developed by van Oudenhoven and van der Zee offers important elements to an intercultural competence approach. Their MPQ can be used for selection of employees, both at first entry and when composing multicultural teams. It can also be used when selection is a luxury, as in so many expatriate assignments. Here it helps in risk management by providing a basis for individualized coaching and support to expatriates (and their partners) before and during their assignment, as well as when they return home.

Intercultural competences in training interventions

For our own work in intercultural management training, we were interested in competences that were both related to specific organizational behaviours and could be developed through training. To this end, we developed the Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC), like the IDI and the MPQ a self-assessment questionnaire, to look at four 4 intercultural competences:

Intercultural Sensitivity: The ability to recognize multiple perspectives on an event or behaviour, to recognize one's own cultural values and those of others, and to pick up on verbal and nonverbal signals.



Managing Uncertainty: The ability to manage the greater uncertainty of intercultural situations.

Intercultural Communication: The ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of members from different cultural groups.

Building Commitment: The ability to stimulate interaction and cooperation, and take the lead while keeping others on board. Involves sensitivity to the dynamics within larger groups of people inside and outside the organization, an understanding of these dynamics and the ability to benefit from them.

For each competence, we developed specific training modules that can be combined in different ways, depending on the needs of the individual or group. For managerial functions, for example, Building Commitment should be key, while for non-managerial functions, special attention can be given to Intercultural Communication. The need to manage uncertainty depends both on the type and number of cultural groups involved and aspects of the task. Intercultural Sensitivity will always be trained, but how it is trained depends, for example, on whether we are dealing with an existing multicultural team or with participants who do not work together as a group.

During the last 2 years we have been able to test the practicality of the instrument with various organizations. These included one of the largest automotive companies in the world, a large international bank and a mid-size manufacturing company.

The automotive company was in the process of setting up a cross-cultural competence centre for the 5 top levels of the organization. The company's prior experience was that intercultural trainers often could not translate their knowledge into practical information for their target audience. Moreover, they were not sufficiently aware of other organizational and management development programs, for example, negotiation trainings and leadership programs. Last but not least, they did not have tools to assess individual learner needs.

The cross-cultural competence centre was created to bridge the two worlds of training providers and training audience – in other words, to help translate the available cross-cultural knowledge into practical interventions, with a view to both specific job requirements and individual learning needs of managers. In this process, the IRC proved to be helpful. It allowed us to assess individual learning needs as well as the overall level of learning needs for representative groups of learners. Moreover, it could easily be integrated into other training programs (e.g., Negotiation) by providing a basis for learners to explore what they needed to develop in order to succeed in other cultural contexts (e.g., when negotiating across borders).

The international bank used the IRC as an immediate link to the competencies they had defined earlier as being relevant for its next generation of leaders. These competencies had already been defined with a view to making them travel across cultures, and a leadership



development program for high potentials had been put into place around them. The program still needed an intercultural training module that naturally fitted in with the program's overall goals. Traditional intercultural training would have raised participants' awareness of cultural differences, but would most likely have been rather disconnected from the overall leadership development program. The training built around the IRC offered participants the opportunity to assess their intercultural competences, to further develop these and to establish the link between the IRC competencies and the competences that were defined as relevant by their employer and trained throughout the rest of the program.

The mid-size manufacturing company had not yet initiated intercultural training for its subsidiaries located in different parts of the world. Top management mainly wanted to assess the overall level of intercultural competence of management and staff, suspecting that frictions and communicative problems were mainly due to one of the company's 4 subsidiaries. Results however showed that the members of 3 subsidiaries had relatively low scores on the IRC. Given these findings, the company decided to invest into teambuilding trainings for all subsidiaries.

Guidelines for deciding which intercultural competences are needed

Common to all three approaches to intercultural competence is a clear focus on the learner and on the need to sustain interaction. Moreover, they all offer practical assessment tools to make

progress measurable. The approaches differ in the nature of the competences being assessed, and in how directly they can be translated into specific organizational behaviours. Together, they illustrate the complexity of what it takes to sustain interaction between members of different cultural groups. As we mentioned earlier, our selection is not exhaustive, and other valid approaches and assessment tools have been developed (see Wiersinga, 2003, for a critical overview of available tools).

Since we cannot offer an exhaustive summary of what is available, we would like to end our discussion with some guidelines for deciding which competences are likely to be relevant for a given organization and a given intercultural work setting. We will focus on 3 aspects:

What is the nature of the interaction to be sustained?

Whose intercultural competence is at issue?

How much time does it take to develop a given competence?

What is the nature of the interaction to be sustained?

Interactions we may engage in with members of other cultural groups differ in several ways, which influence the kind of competencies needed. Interactions may be *symmetrical* (e.g., between colleagues) or *asymmetrical* (e.g., between superior-subordinate). In general, asymmetrical interactions require *higher degrees* of certain intercultural competences than symmetrical interactions (e.g., more Cultural



Empathy) because they involve an unequal distribution of power that must be handled with care. Asymmetrical interactions may also require *additional* intercultural competences (e.g., Building Commitment) because they often require the coordination of activities of several people over a longer period of time. Interactions also differ in *how many people are involved*: We may be dealing with dyads, teams, departments, organizations, etc. In general, the more people involved, the *more* intercultural competences will be needed. Finally, interactions differ in their *duration*. Short-term interactions (e.g., complaint handling) require different sets of competences than mid-term interactions (e.g., team projects) and long-term interactions (e.g., mergers and acquisitions).

Different job requirements can be analyzed with these criteria. For example, cooperating is inherently symmetrical and typically covers longer periods of time. Leading and coaching, motivating and influencing are all inherently asymmetrical, whereby the first two types of behavior typically cover longer periods of time, while the last two types can be of varying duration. Communicating and negotiating can be both symmetrical and asymmetrical; while both may take place in an instance, negotiating tends to cover longer periods of time, involving many different types of communicative behavior.

Whose intercultural competence is at issue?

This may be an individual, an existing team, a whole department or the organization as such. For example, the MPQ has already proven to be beneficial both for individuals (e.g., expatriate assignments) and teams. The IRC has been used both for individuals, specific groups of individuals, and a whole organization. The developmental perspective proposed by Bennett certainly applies to individual learners and teams as well. However, it may also be applied to a whole organization: A company may consider the development of ethno-relative attitudes as a strategic goal, and use the guidelines for enhancing development as discussed above to initiate a broad spectrum of organizational activities (e.g., internal communication, company events, composition of top management, etc).

How much time does it take to develop a given intercultural competence?

Some competences can be trained within a relatively short period of time, e.g., those assessed by the IRC. Ethno-relative attitudes take more time to change, and some of the aspects assessed by the MPQ may not change in time at all (e.g., Emotional Stability). In this case, assessment helps to establish a *risk profile*, and to decide on added support for the



individual (e.g., extra organizational support for an expatriate assignment; challenging tasks for highly flexible individuals in a mono-cultural team).

We hope that these guidelines help companies to decide about which intercultural competences they need to invest in, and how they can go about developing them. We also hope to have contributed to a new approach to intercultural management training, an Intercultural Competence approach for approach that starts with the learner and helps him or her (or 'it', in the case of larger units) to sustain interaction with members of other cultural groups.

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