

Personnel Training in a Small World

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The expression "It's a small world," has been used with such monotonous regularity over such a long period of time that it has lost most of its original force and is now little more than a "catch phrase." Yet in these days of air travel at sonic speeds, of radiotelegraph communications at hundreds of words a minute, even the most obdurate isolationist must admit that this post-war world is vastly smaller than the one he knew in 1939. Industrialists are beginning to realize that this small world is bounded for them only by the distances to which their representatives can travel, and the limits to which their communications facilities can reach. They are beginning to realize, too, through their own experiences overseas and from the published experiences of others, that there is a good deal more to international good will than an attractively packaged product at a reasonable price. This is becoming increasingly obvious in various parts of the world where our success in establishing cordial relations has been something less than startling.

The writer who, during the war, was charged as part of his responsibilities with the creation and maintenance of good will between an Air Force Headquarters and foreign civil and governmental officials, has a vivid recollection of the almost insuperable obstacles to mutual understanding which he had to try to overcome. There is ample evidence that a good part of the obvious ill-feeling which existed and still exists was definitely the fault of the American tourists, business representatives, government employees, and soldiers stationed in or passing through the various foreign countries. The fact that during the war this arose in most cases from nothing more than the American's ignorance of the modes of the country through which he was passing did not minimize the serious impediment to certain phases of our war effort created by this lack of cooperation.

The situation has not changed materially since the end of the war, although in some quarters it is felt that it has gotten worse. Only, the problem now is not obtaining cooperation for the furtherance of military aims, but securing good will for industrial and for political purposes, and for the decent future

of three-quarters of the world now struggling to lift itself from the post-war morass of hunger, want, and economic insufficiency.

Prior to the war, the foreign cartoonists poked fun at American visitors in what, compared to their efforts now, was a kindly way. Although the newspaper articles and cartoons inspired by American visitors were regarded as scathing denunciations of our lack of culture and our inability to appreciate the finer things of life, they were, nevertheless, generally good-natured, and usually nothing was said, done, or printed that would make the American visitor so seriously uncomfortable that he would abandon his plans for travel and settle for a summer in an American city.

Now, however, other far more serious factors than the foreigner's dislike for ostentation have become a part of the picture. We are living in a world in which jockeying for influence and power are the primary items on political agenda. Publicity is being given to our faults in every corner of the globe. Our weaknesses are exposed and highlighted with a vicious bitterness aimed at weaning away the sympathy of the foreign populations from what the American way of life represents. Our industrialists and our governmental leaders are realizing that temporary need for our help is not in itself sufficient to insure cooperation and fellowship once that need has been satisfied, and the foreign countries are again self-supporting. Some nations during the war gladly accepted whatever help we were able to give them in any of a variety of ways, but did not pay for that help with the cooperation and amity that we had imagined would be forthcoming. The conclusion is inescapable that America now must lay the groundwork of amity, cooperation, and international good-will on which will depend certainly the political future of the world, and very probably the future of our industrial way of life.

In spite of the lessons learned in both World Wars, very little has been done up to now to inculcate in the American representative abroad an appreciation of the extent of his responsibilities in helping to lay this groundwork. Industry now has awakened to the importance of training as an integral part of successful management. Fortunately, the con-

cept of industrial training is not limited to include only in-service development of skills, or the training of supervisory personnel in an appreciation of the value of the psychological approach to human relations on the job level. In an ever increasing number of companies it is being extended to include another vital need—the necessity for sending the American representative abroad with a full awareness of the part he has to play in the campaign.

The solution to the problem inherent in such a project is being sought in various ways. Here at RCA Communications, Inc., we have felt that while a knowledge of the language of the particular country to which a representative is to be sent is of great importance, of equal importance is an appreciation of how the people of that country think and act and feel. To this end, a foreign language and customs training course in Spanish and French was inaugurated in March, 1947. It was intended primarily for those of our representatives in various classifications who were or who would be scheduled for tours of foreign duty. Attendance was voluntary, and the response to the original announcement of the courses was instantaneous and overwhelming. So numerous were the applications for admittance that we extended the program to those of our regular employees who were desirous simply of widening their scope of usefulness and enhancing their possibilities of promotion. As a morale factor the courses assumed considerable importance.

The course was a six months one, conducted on an experimental basis. Granted that the average person cannot learn a great deal of a foreign language in a six-months period, our average student, nevertheless, learned the elements of the language he was studying under an intensified routine, to the extent of being able to read and understand the average newspaper article and to carry on a simple conversation. We taught him a basic vocabulary of some 1,000 words, which a few months in the foreign country to which he would be assigned would augment into a practical working knowledge of the language. His instruction, all of the conversational type, was given by a person who had acquired his own knowledge of the language in the coun-

tries to which they were native. It is a fact, perhaps a regrettable one, that the average foreigner with whom the American abroad comes into contact does not speak any more like a college professor than the average American speaks like a Harvard Professor of English. We therefore recognized the necessity of making use of various guest lecturers and teachers, from every walk of life, so that the student might become accustomed to different pronunciations, varying accents, and national types.

Once the student had attained the basic language knowledge, the second phase of the training was begun. This part of the course may be outlined under the following very broad sub-heads:

1. The background of the country; how and when founded and by whom; its history.
2. The political situation prevailing.
3. The predominant religions; their main tenets; how to recognize members of particular religious sects; what not to do or say.
4. Social manners; behaviour in the streets, parks, etc.; after business hours; while visiting or entertaining visitors; restaurants and cafe behaviour; how to order; size of tip, etc.
5. Social relations; the foreigner's attitude toward his women; things the visitor must not do or say.
6. The prejudices of the country; what its inhabitants do and do not like.
7. How to write business letters and how to make a business call.

The amount of knowledge the students were able to assimilate in this comparatively short period of time was most gratifying. It is planned, on the basis of the success achieved in the administration of these experimental courses, to reinstitute language and customs training early in 1948. We are confident that this type of training is one of the principal ways in which the friendship and cooperation of foreign nations can be gained for our organization. We feel also that through these courses, we shall be helping in some small way to achieve a practical implementation of the tenets of the good neighbor policy.