Expat Training

Don't leave home without it.

By Gary Wederspahn

Illustration by Eyewire

Organizations worldwide often react to economic downturns and uncertainty abroad by cutting training for expatriates and international business travelers. That shortsighted response is unwise and counterproductive. But don't take my word for it. Cross-border business failures make the best case for intercultural training.

Unidata. The European company Unidata, formed to challenge IBM's domination of the global computer market, was a high-profile alliance of Dutch, German, and French computer producers. That alliance formed many multicultural businesses and technical teams. After several years of acrimonious infighting, the entire venture was dissolved without launching a single product.

Siemens and Westinghouse. These two powerhouses planned to team up and sell worldwide a range of industrial automation and control systems. The project, however, never survived negotia-

tions. The stated cause: lack of common ground between partners.

Renault and Volvo. According to *Ward's Automotive International*, the deal between these two automotive giants failed due to "overwhelming cultural differences."

Expatriates and international business travelers know the importance of making a positive impression. Failure not only undermines the mission of their organizations, but also hinders expats from making local allies.

Expatriate dis-plomacy

Saudi Arabians, Turks, and Egyptians have told me that they dislike the tendency of U.S. business travelers to rush starting a project before they've invested time and effort in building personal relationships. Intercultural experts Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, in their book *Managing Cultural Differences*, summarize feedback from Arab businesspeople regarding how they perceive many Westerners. To them, Westerners

- act superior, as if they know the answer to everything
- aren't willing to share credit for joint efforts
- are unable or unwilling to respect and adjust to local customs and culture
- prefer solutions based on their home cultures rather than meeting local needs
- resist working through local administrative, legal, channels, and procedures
- manage in an autocratic and intimidating way
- are too imposing and pushy.

Reactions from people in other countries strongly indicate that more intercultural training of U.S. businesspeople is required. The May 1999 *Forbes* article "Damn Yankees" reveals the negative opinions of U.S. businesspeople held by citizens of 11 countries. "What drives me crazy," says one Colombian executive, "is the American need for information, right now! Americans are also too straightforward, too direct."

It's neither accurate nor fair to exaggerate the poor image of U.S. citizens abroad. Many host nationals also mention their positive characteristics: optimism, industriousness, inventiveness, decisiveness, enthusiasm, and friendliness.

An American Expat's View

You're not in Kansas anymore.

By David Beadles

"Remember, this isn't America; we do things differently here in Europe."

If I hear that phrase again on the job, I'm likely to froth in a fit of fury. After working for three years across six different European countries for three different companies (two in the past six months), that's one phrase I've heard more than a few times. But the truth is, it's true. The frustrating thing is, people assume I don't know that.

Believe it or not, the European business world doesn't think much of "the American manifest destiny." Yes, the United States is the world's economic and military powerhouse. Indeed, Europe does thank America for its assistance in WWII. And, when Bill Gates speaks, the world does listen. When you're outside of U.S. borders, however, those feats don't hold much relevance. Unfortunately, most Americans working abroad don't seem to be aware of that fact. Thus, I continue to suffer from my compatriots' missteps.

I'll never forget the American systems planner visiting our Brussels office for a mere three days who insisted on bringing her own Starbucks coffee. Her European colleagues snickered in the back smoking room, saying something like, "Americans don't know coffee. We've been brewing the best beans for centuries. Then along comes a retail fad, and they think they know it all. The least she could have done was try the exquisite beverage from our 10.000 euro Italian espresso machine."

Was such a small thing really an issue? Indeed it was. It served to alienate the woman from many colleagues at the outset of her brief stay, potentially threatening the success of her project.

I could go on with other stories, some in which I'm the buffoon. On the other hand, I've participated in numerous projects in which the American perspective was just right.

My best advice: If you're working abroad, prepare yourself for the adventure. Don't just read a few travel articles on the Web; learn the region's history. Find out what the locals like to do and

Non-U.S. expatriates also carry problematic cultural baggage. For example, the Dutch are thought to be blunt, Germans inflexible, Japanese vague and indirect, and Latin Americans casual towards deadlines. Therefore, it's worthwhile to equip expatriates and business travelers of all nationalities with sufficient intercultural savvy.

Cultural maladjustment

Despite best intentions to establish rapport with the locals, expatriates in the stressful throes of cultural adaptation aren't in good condition to develop such relationships. In many cases, their marriages are shaken, careers threatened, and self-concepts debilitated.

Settler International, a worldwide relocation assistance company, reports that the divorce rate among expatriate couples is 40 percent higher than their domestic counterparts, and the school dropout rate of their children is 50 percent higher than in their home countries. Adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, cultural values, and social customs is stressful. A 1999 survey by Cendant International Assignment Services found that of 300 companies contacted, 63 percent reported failed expatriate assignments.

Symptoms of culture shock significantly hinder expatriates' ability to establish friendships with local people. The problems include

- negative feelings about the local culture and people, including irritability, hostility, and defensiveness
- homesickness, nervousness, depression, uncharacteristic mood swings, anxiety, and anger
- withdrawal or exaggerated dependence, aggressiveness, domineering behavior, and inappropriate attention-seeking
- self-damaging behavior, such as sexual adventurism and alcohol or drug abuse
- indecisiveness, inflexibility, close-mindedness, hypersensitivity to criticism, impatience, and boastfulness
- ridicule or excessive criticism of local people.

Proper assessment, selection, counseling, training, and support can prevent or lessen most of those unfortunate reactions.

eat, and their biggest peeves. Once you're there, open yourself up to the experience. Listen to what people have to say, wait, and listen some more. Non-native English speakers may take a little more time to get their point across, so be patient.

Three years ago, my then-boss (we'll call him Joe) traveled abroad for the first time—to Amsterdam. Joe's your typical American executive: fast thinking, talking, and acting. If he's not multitasking between his cellular phone, his email, and the meeting simultaneously taking place in his office, then he might as well be idle.

Joe and I attended our first team business dinner, which was quite the event: a five-course extravaganza with the finest of wines. Before we'd finished the second course, Joe was pacing the room. Towards the end of the meal, just as our European colleagues began sharing their expectations and hopes for our new venture, Joe was outside hailing a taxi. His actions that night foreshadowed a behavior pattern that had him out of the organization within 10 months.

I'm not sure whether it's American arrogance or merely a need to feel comfortable outside of the realm of familiarity, but Americans do seem to create their own roadblocks to success in the international workplace. The frightening thought is how many companies continue to send employees abroad to work on critical projects, without a day of cultural awareness or linguistic training.

As I see it, Americans can go about working outside of their national borders in two ways. One, throw themselves into the middle of the situation and figure things out—and, quite often, they succeed. But, there's another, subtler method that proves more effective: Do their homework. It's simple and widely respected.

That preparation will come in handy the next time a colleague tries to educate you on the fundamental differences between European and American protocol. If you've done your research, then you'll be in a position to agree or offer your own insight: "Yes, I know. In fact, you put mayonnaise on your french fries. But you really call them fried potatoes, don't you?"

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Starting the discussion

Michael Marquardt, in his *Info-line* "Successful Global Training," writes that 70 percent of American businesspeople going abroad receive no cultural training or preparation; 59 percent of HRD executives say their companies offer no cross-cultural training; 5 percent didn't even know of the existence of such training.

Clearly, organizations need to do more to prepare expatriates for establishing rapport with their local colleagues and neighbors. Here's how you can start a cross-cultural training discussion at your organization.

Assess the need. If some of your senior executives aren't convinced that employees need cross-cultural training, conduct a survey of all employees who have cross-border relationships and responsibilities, especially current and former expatriates who can share their firsthand experiences.

Fine-tune the focus. Hold focus groups to determine which employees have the greatest need and which projects and countries have the highest priority. Limiting your request for training resources to the most important requirements makes it easier to justify intercultural training to senior management.

Debrief the damage. Analyze all incidents of failed overseas assignments and business ventures. Audit them for preventable cross-cultural causes. Calculate the financial and human costs. Debrief senior international decision-makers.

Raise the awareness level. Enlighten employees and managers of the cross-cultural challenges and opportunities facing your organization:

- Obtain reprint permission of articles (such as this one) for your in-house publications.
- Ask intercultural specialists to make presentations at high-visibility meetings and sack-lunch seminars.
- Publicize the successes of your expatriates and international business travelers.
- Invite providers of intercultural services to showcase parts of their programs.

You can also post links on your intranet to online sources of free information on the cultures of most countries.

Gary Wederspahn *is an intercultural trainer, consultant, speaker, and writer. He has designed and conducted cross-cultural training for hundreds of expatriates and global executives. This article is based partly on his new book,* Intercultural Services: A Worldwide Buyer's Guide and Sourcebook *(Butterworth Heinemann); gary@intercultural-help.com.*