

TRAINING FOR CROSS-CULTURAL OPERATIONS

*growth in intercultural
sensitivity means growth
in interpersonal sensitivity*

As business, study, and travel opportunities increase on an international scale, there is a growing realization of the similarities which exist among the peoples of the world. Although desirable, this awareness can be the source of intercultural problems for the individual who accepts them too readily. Such anticipations regarding the relative ease of international travel can be deceptive for persons with little or no experience in meeting the demands of personal adjustment required in a new environment. Insensitivity to the *real* differences which exist between cultures has often led to misunderstanding and frustration resulting in unsuccessful business transactions, unrewarding student experiences and disappointing vacations.

It is the contention of this article that persons can function successfully abroad only when they are: (1) aware of themselves as culturally conditioned individuals; (2) alert to the differences in perception which exist between themselves and others; (3) aware of their own social and emotional needs and are attentive to those same needs in others and (4) are willing to work actively toward meaningful relationships with others through communication and the development of interpersonal skills. The following statement suggests a method of preparing persons for intercultural encounters by developing in the individual a sensitivity to the traditions, beliefs, values and behavior of himself and others.

PROCESS OF INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Problems of personal adjustment to a foreign environment have frequently been referred to as "culture shock." This phenomenon is usually precipitated by anxiety which results from the sudden loss of familiar surroundings. A person experiences frustration and irritation as he constantly finds his "natural" way of behaving to be in conflict with the life style of those around him. In addition, continual uncertainty and ambiguity about how he should act and react causes discomfort and uneasiness.

Over the years, three distinctive patterns of response to "culture shock" have been identified. These methods of dealing with the new and unfamiliar have been described as "flight," "fight," and "adaptation."

"FLIGHT"

When a person responds to a new situation through *flight*, he rejects those people and things around him which cause his discomfort and withdraws from any opportunity to interact with them. In each instance, he places "blame" either on the local population for a lack of "understanding" or on himself for inadequacy in handling the new experience. The result is that the individual reacts defensively in flight to fellow nationals of a foreign enclave or some other regressive action in order to remove the threatening atmosphere which surrounds him and reinstate the security of familiar behavioral and belief patterns.

Flight may also be manifested by extreme behavior in the opposite direction. In such cases, the individual does not flee from his host culture by joining a foreign enclave, but instead flees from his own national identity by joining the host culture. Such behavior, known to some as "going native," is also a means of reducing tension. Accepting a state of *dependence*, such individuals lose much of their ability to operate on their own. While such action may be temporarily satisfying, the ultimate effects of denying one's own cultural identity may in the long-run be more harmful than beneficial.

"FIGHT"

Other persons respond to a new culture with hostility and aggression. They become aggravated with those around them for making them feel ill-at-ease and as a result become determined to "show the natives how we do it at home." Such individuals *fight* the new environment, trying to change the culture to which they have come, rather than attempting to understand it and

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respond to it. Such a state of *counter-dependence* many times does not provide an avenue for beneficial reciprocal relationships.

"ADAPTATION"

Finally, there are those who begin the slow and painstaking process of cultural *adaptation* and adjustment. The individual deciding to take this approach neither rejects himself nor others, but rather tries to adapt to the new situation through constant openness to learning and behavioral growth. This requires an ability and desire to *listen* for the responses, both verbal and non-verbal, of those around him. At the same time, he must gain an awareness of the messages which he is sending out and the possible interpretations which others might have of them. In essence, he must develop the skill of interpersonal communication in an *interdependent* relationship.

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

We have defined intercultural adaptation and adjustment as a process of continual learning through interpersonal communications and the building of interdependent intercultural relationships. There is, however, another dimension to the learning — this is the skill of "learning how to learn."

It is generally accepted that the physical growth of every individual is accompanied by a certain social and emotional growth as well. Although the former is readily observable and quite easy to measure, the latter's characteristics are not as easy to evaluate. Many times, the only means we have to gauge the extent of our social and emotional awareness is through the response of those around us. Our social growth is thus based upon the norms, expectations, values and beliefs of those with whom we have grown up or spent our lives. In such a situation, it is seldom that we need to stop and attempt to objectively "take stock" of the significance of our beliefs or ways of behaving. We, and those around us, accept our behavior as "natural" and correct.

In an intercultural setting, however, we are faced with the necessity of a continual reassessment of those values and standards heretofore taken for granted. The result may be a discovery that our "cultural vision" is highly resistant to change. We may become defensive when we discover that there are certain beliefs which are "frozen" in our way of thinking. We find it difficult to understand or tolerate persons with conflicting beliefs. The reconsideration of many of these "frozen" values, standards and ideals is, however, one of the most crucial processes necessary for successful intercultural adjustment. For it is by this process that personal growth and expanded cultural vision can be realized, resulting in a greater awareness and understanding of the world in which we must operate.

THREE-PHASE CYCLE

The learning process described above has been conceptualized as a three-phase cycle of "unfreezing-moving-refreezing." Of the three phases, the first is usually the most difficult, requiring the breakdown of ethnocentric biases which have distorted cultural vision for many years. No matter how much an individual may want to learn, he brings to a new environment a certain ambivalence and resistance to learning and change. Behavior change is threatening because it raises questions of personal inadequacies to meet new challenges and it stimulates anxieties about possible failure and ridicule by others.

Once this fear has been overcome, however, a person is ready to learn. "Moving," or the second phase of learning, refers to the actual process of expanding one's cultural vision through the readjustment of attitudes and perceptions. Through this process one becomes more aware of the alternative perspectives which are available to him. This is the phase of actual "learning" when the individual accepts or rejects new experiences and reevaluates his past and present perceptions in order to form a framework for future behavior.

In the third phase of the learning cycle, "refreezing," the individual "locks in place" his new perceptions and ways of behaving so that regression to a previous mode of behavior will not readily occur. At this point, we may say that a behavioral or attitudinal "change" has taken place. The extent, nature, and duration of this change, however, depend very much upon the reinforcements which are supplied thereafter and the extent to which new perceptions formed coincide with those held by friends and associates with whom the individual will be working and living from day to day.

HUMAN RELATIONS TRAINING

It cannot be expected that any management training program or human relations experience of a duration of two weeks or even two months can accomplish radical attitudinal and behavioral changes in an individual. A significant contribution can be made, however, to greater self- and other-awareness by introducing persons to the *means* whereby new and unanticipated situations can be encountered and successfully handled as opportunities for meaningful personal growth. The goal thus becomes the development of an attitudinal *flexibility* which will enable an individual to gain the utmost from his exposure to different points of view and unfamiliar modes of behavior. One of the most potentially successful means of accomplishing such a goal can be found in recent programs involving human relations training methods.

A basic assumption of human relations training is that learning becomes most effective when it flows from *doing*. Through simulation of a new and unfamiliar environment the individual can, to a certain degree, experience the feelings associated with culture shock. With the help of others, he can become acquainted with the learning process of "unfreezing-moving-refreezing" and gain skills for more effectively meeting and overcoming the difficulties involved in adjusting to a new environment. These learning and communications skills will

hopefully provide the means by which the individual will be able to function more successfully abroad.

Human relations training is designed to enable participants and staff to work together on problems of common interest. A great deal of learning flows from the relationships between participants in the program as they interact with one another. Since, as in an intercultural experience, each person brings with him different values, behaviors and beliefs, the interaction of the members may be used to increase awareness of the learning process and personal learning goals, thereby creating a foundation for behavioral experimentation when the individual goes abroad. In this way, participants are able to learn from experiences which they have had, rather than merely studying cases of problems which others have experienced. At the same time, they can be helped and taught to deal with such experiences through the development of skills in communication and responsive sensitivity.

The following is a discussion of the conditions for effective intercultural training.

A. EXPOSURE OF BEHAVIOR THROUGH INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

Any effective intercultural training program which attempts to accomplish the goals we have outlined above must encourage all members to participate so that their various behavioral patterns and modes of orientation may be seen by others. Flight, manifested by a reluctance to participate, will raise the same barriers between members of the training group (the small group, which is the basic unit of a human relations training program) as it does in a foreign culture. Participation, on the other hand, will allow one, perhaps for the first time, to begin to see how his behavior is interpreted through the eyes of others. Through an analysis and understanding of the reasons for one's own behavior, the participant can become aware of his projected self and assess the impact which his actions have on others. This is

the only way that a person can become "unfrozen" and open to learning.

A formula for handling oneself overseas begins to emerge from this experience. We see that a person cannot become "unfrozen" and responsive to his own needs and the needs of others until he decides to risk exposure of his behavior and beliefs in order to gain additional insight into himself and his relations with others. It seems likely that the same process would be necessary if one is to eventually come to understand life in another culture and be understood by the people of that culture.

B. FEEDBACK

A willingness to act and participate, however, is not enough. Action must be followed by reaction from other members of the group — which in many senses constitutes a "new culture" for the individual. These reactions, called feedback, enable the individual to become aware of any incongruities between his self-image and the image which he projects to others.

This experience, however, is not always an easy one. Many individuals become aware of how difficult it really is to communicate with one another. They discover that communication means not only making yourself understood, but *understanding others* as well. Some, for the first time, come to realize that a *relationship* involves *two* people and is a two-way street requiring patience, understanding, and interest.

The development of this sensitivity to others is a prime objective in preparing individuals for intercultural experiences. In a foreign environment, the differences in perception and interpretations are multiplied a hundred-fold and the challenge of establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships becomes even more dependent upon feedback and the communications process.

C. ATMOSPHERE

Since for many of the participants, human relations training is the first experience they have had in consciously developing their interpersonal skills, an

accepting and supportive emotional climate is needed to reduce defensiveness and encourage members to speak frankly about their feelings, values and beliefs. Such a supportive atmosphere is also beneficial to those who are providing it, because through their help they are becoming more sensitive to the fears and hesitations of others.

Such a climate is especially helpful during the group's experiences, because it enables the individual to undergo the difficult process of "unfreezing" without fear of major repercussions. Unfortunately, this may not always be the case abroad. The atmosphere of a real intercultural encounter, especially when experienced under pressure of performance standards for business or study, many times makes it more difficult for the individual to "let himself go" and experiment with the learning process. Such prior experience in the supportive atmosphere of a training program, therefore, begins to build self-confidence and learning abilities within the individual providing a basis upon which he can experiment further when he is confronted with the challenge of adjusting to an environment in which the atmosphere might not be as supportive.

D. INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPERIENCE

Although experiences such as those described above are usually emotional processes, an adequate analysis of these experiences requires intellectual understanding as well. It is necessary, therefore, to also provide participants with a conceptual framework or a "cognitive map" within which they can order and structure the relationships to which they have been exposed. The cognitive map, therefore, becomes essential to the second or "moving" phase of the learning process, during which the individual compares, sorts, evaluates, and accepts or rejects the new knowledge to which he has been exposed.

Such a cognitive map also helps an individual to "bridge the gap" in relating his training experience to the general ele-

ments of intercultural encounters. This can be done in anticipation of future overseas experiences and can also assist a person when he is actually confronted with the overseas experience itself.

Through cognitive mapping, an individual can become aware of the methods which he has been using to explain and understand human interaction around him. With the help of the other members of the group and the staff, he can begin to assess the adequacy of his former modes of orientation for adaptation to a new and unknown environment. Cognitive mapping thus becomes the integrating phase during which the individual orders and relates the random experiences he has had. The learning process thus becomes a blending of socio-emotional perceptions and intellectual reasoning enabling the individual to transfer his learning experience from the training setting to an analogous situation he may encounter upon arrival abroad.

INTERPERSONAL-INTERCULTURAL

The central objective in utilizing human relations training to prepare individuals

for work and life in a foreign environment is to *increase their sensitivity* to themselves and to others and to *provide them with the communication and learning skills* that will enable them to *continue adaptive processes after they have left the formal training program*. Through the cognitive supports which have been built into the individual's experience it is hoped that he will be able to more easily recognize and cope with potential disruptive influences which he will face in a foreign culture.

Growth in *intercultural sensitivity* thus is essentially growth in *interpersonal sensitivity*. In retrospect we can now see that the four conditions which we set for a successful intercultural experience are essentially those which must also be considered in all interpersonal relations. Self-awareness; an awareness of differences between oneself and others; an awareness of an attentiveness to the social and emotional needs of self and others; and a willingness to work actively toward meaningful relationships with others through communication — these are the aims of human relations training and intercultural education.

Although much remains to be learned about man's behavior in confronting the unknown and the unfamiliar, it seems reasonable to expect that his fear will be diminished and his chance for success strengthened if he can develop the ability to help others and be helped himself. If human relations training can aid the individual in becoming better prepared to seek out and utilize the potential supports and reinforcements available to him in a new environment, it seems that it has already greatly contributed to interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

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TOPS TO PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR MINORITY GROUP MEMBERS

The initiation of a new funding plan, Training Opportunities Projects (TOPS), to finance its Action Plan for Minority Group Involvement in 1970 has been announced by ASTD.

Headed by Patrick C. Farbro, a past president of the society and director of personnel programs for Radio Corporation of America, TOPS will seek support from ASTD members and their organizations to provide scholarship aid to minority group members of the training profession.

The Action Plan calls on ASTD to support the professional growth of its minority group members and to involve them more deeply in the activities of the society.

In addition to providing funds for scholarships to educational programs offered by ASTD and other organizations, the Action Plan and TOPS will endeavor to recruit minority group members to the training and development profession, to develop a cadre of resource people who can serve as consultants on community development training problems and to develop a workshop program to upgrade the skills of minority group trainers.

Both the Action Plan and the TOPS funding project were developed with the aid of minority group members of ASTD. Contributions to the TOPS fund may be sent to: ASTD-TOPS, P.O. Box 5307, Madison, Wisconsin 53705.