

The Art of Training Abroad

Training people from other cultures poses a variety of challenges. Training programs cannot simply be translated—they must be culturally adapted with an eye to the taboos and turn-ons of the participants' culture. Trainers must consider everything, including the use of humor and role plays, program design, "logical" flow, measurement instruments, feedback, and "face" issues.

In 1992, the 12 member countries of the European Community will take a major step toward eliminating the current trade barriers among them, and unite to gradually create one huge, integrated market with a population of 320 million people, a third larger than the population of the United States.

The process of European economic integration—commonly referred to simply as "1992"—will result in sweeping changes in virtually every aspect of business life, and will allow goods, services, money, and people to move freely across the borders of the 12 member countries.

For U.S. companies, 1992 represents a historic opportunity. Many American firms are already positioning themselves to take advantage of the new integrated market, moving quickly to establish their export, sales, and distribution bases with existing European firms. As American corporations affiliate with, merge with, acquire, or are acquired by European concerns, the need for cross-cultural training will increase dramatically.

So the question of culture—what it means and how to address cultural issues effectively—will become more and more central to the success of training programs. In this month's "Four by Four," trainers offer tips on how to think about culture and develop training programs that hurdle cross-cultural barriers.

GU9 8NS, England. His remarks are from a speech he gave in July at the 10th National Conference on Education and Training, in Birmingham, England.

What is this thing we call culture? Anyone who takes a moment or two to think about it will quickly conclude that culture involves style, ethos, and values. And as training professionals, we know that culture has everything to do with the way people give and receive information. In short, it has everything to do with the way people learn.

But what's less obvious is that culture is not only important in the training field, where you're attempting to impart information and change behavior. Culture is not, as many people believe, peripheral to business—it's central to business. And not just to some parts of the enterprise, but to all parts. Culture is about the whole of business.

But surely culture does not permeate every aspect of business—such as finance or production or sales? Indeed it does. Just look at the way finance is structured in the U.K. or the United States. The way finance is structured prevents them from going after market share in the same way that the Japanese do with the government/business/banking linkage that is central to the Japanese financial system.



Lina Cibesak

**“Culture is
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Need further proof? Western corporations are dominated by accountants and financial people. By comparison, you would be hard pressed to find even one Japanese company with an accountant among the corporate directors. Truly culture is about the whole of business.

Guptara's recommendations

1 When you're developing a cross-cultural training program, bear in mind that getting your message across to people from another culture goes far beyond the accurate translation of words from one language to another, or even substituting the correct cultural equivalents for gestures, attitudes, and customs.

Know that culture is more than the sum of all these things, that it goes straight to the heart of the way a particular culture conducts business. That understanding will give you a good starting point from which to approach the issue of culture.

2 You simply cannot train people to do something—to behave a certain way—if you don't have credibility. And credibility is another culture-bound concept. Credibility formation begins long before people meet you, because credibility is bestowed by the culture.

In India, the country where I was born, people have reverence for teachers. Standing at a lectern in front of an audience bequeaths instant credibility. Take the word "guru." It means teacher. But it can also mean someone who reveals God to you or comes to represent God to you. That said, it's easy to see why the question of credibility never arises for a university lecturer or trainer in India.

Not so in the U.K., the United States, or many other Western countries, where audiences are more critical. Their attitude might be summed up as, "Just who is that person standing up there and what does he or she have to teach me, if anything?" For the cross-cultural trainer, that critical attitude poses two sets of problems:

■ The trainer will need to establish credibility with Western audiences.

■ Even more difficult, the trainer will have to get participants who are reluctant to be critical to, in fact, become so.

I sometimes accomplish the latter by starting off with deliberately provocative statements with which I know the large majority of participants has to disagree. It's necessary because I've simply got to get participants asking questions, to be critical about me, and to think about what I'm saying. After all, I'll never get them to change their behavior if they disagree with me and I'm not even aware of it.

It's important to realize that the participants may not share your view or goal of the training. Their attitude may be that training is listening to a lecture, taking notes, and going home, whereas your purpose may be to get them to change their behavior. Their view may be that getting trained means soaking up information like a sponge and being able to spit it out verbatim at some future point in time, while your goal may be to develop their management skills. Unless you understand the participants' view of training, there's a good chance your training program will be ineffective.

3 Understanding the taboos and turn-ons of the participants' culture is the single most important issue when developing or administering cross-cultural training.

For example, you've got to be aware that, in Japan, risk taking is by and large taboo. But if you train in Japan unaware of this, you will probably begin to wonder why your role plays don't get off the ground. You'll soon realize it's because no one is volunteering. Why? Because it's taking a risk—after all you might make a fool of yourself.

In the Middle East, a training program would almost surely fail if it included paper exercises and role plays. Paper exercises are for school children and college students, and role plays are games—they're for children, too. Adults in the Middle East learn by discoursing at length

upon the subject at hand.

Let's return to Japan for a moment—the place, I'm told, where interactive videodisc technology was more or less invented. Why don't the Japanese use this wonderful technology to train their own people, instead of just exporting it? The answer is this: Because the Japanese work in teams, function in teams, and learn in teams. Interactive videodisc training is individualized learning—completely inappropriate for the Japanese.

It all comes down to understanding the very specific taboos and turn-ons of the participants' culture.

4 It's also helpful to try to develop a personality profile of the culture for which your training is intended. This isn't meant to stereotype people from a particular country—it's simply intended as a tool to help understand the way they learn.

For example, are the participants concrete, down-to-earth people who would learn best from a precise presentation of the facts? Some might view the Swiss in that manner. Are they orderly, logical, systematic, and meticulous in matters of detail, as many would describe the German personality? Or do they respond best to a lively, witty, novel presentation—one with which they're emotionally engaged—as the French might?

What I've been leading to is this: Are the participants generally factual, intuitive, analytical, or normative? Once you have some sense of the "national" personality characteristics of the training audience, you'll be able to develop guidelines for training people who are factual, for training people who are intuitive, for training people who are analytical, and for groups that are normative. Such guidelines will help you develop the instructional materials and presentation style to which your audience will respond most favorably.

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Definitions of “untranslatable” words can sometimes present a problem in cross-cultural training. But I find that most of the time, it’s not the definitions of things that are tricky—it’s how those definitions are played out culturally, especially when you’re teaching something with a lot of nuances, such as negotiating skills.

Murray’s recommendations

1 **If your training** materials include a video that will be used for two or more very different cultures, you’ll have to answer the question of whether to dub, subtitle, or reshoot all or part of the video. The answer really depends on two things: the norm for the culture in which you’re working, and the skills you’re trying to teach.

For example, in France, people are used to watching English and American television shows and films that have been dubbed in French. Suppose you have a video that was shot in English with English actors and you want to use this video for a French audience. If all the other cultural elements—such as gestures, role play situations, and business etiquette—are acceptable to the French, then you’d probably dub it. But you’d want to use broadcast-quality dubbers—the best people you can possibly afford—because dubbing to match actors’ lip movements is a real art.

In Scandinavian countries, subtitling is the norm. So you’d want to subtitle programs intended for participants from these countries.

But you also have to take into consideration the skills you’re trying to teach. Things get a little trickier there. My company, Learning International, does a lot of interpersonal skills training. This area includes verbal skills, but such skills quickly move into the arena of attitudes and intent. Intent can be cultural, so in programs in which intent is important to the learning, you may have to reshoot.

Likewise for business etiquette. We had a selling skills video not too long ago that was shot in the United States with American actors.

We’d hoped that it could also be used for French audiences.

One videotaped scene showed a salesperson at a business conference, sipping coffee during a break. A “prospective customer” who was also a conference attendee asked if he could sit down. They struck up a conversation that evolved into a low-key sales talk.

Most of the pilot French audience rejected the scene because French business etiquette would prohibit such a sales conversation from taking place while a person was on a coffee break. Clearly, they said, the man was not there to do business—he was there to have his coffee. It’s this type of thing that will dictate whether you will be able to dub or subtitle, or will have to reshoot completely.

2 **The styles** in which people learn vary widely by culture. Though you can’t stereotype an entire nationality of people, we’ve been able to make key observations over the last 20 years.

In my experience, German business audiences tend to feel comfortable with training programs developed in the United States that are highly structured and have a tight, logical flow. They enjoy the rapid pace that is typical of American programs.

French businesspeople, on the other hand, prefer slower-paced programs. An American program would skip by too quickly for them—they’d consider it extremely cursory. Obviously it’s not because the French are slow learners—they just really enjoy discussing and arguing the merits of a subject. It’s the French way. We take that into consideration and usually schedule two days in France for training that takes one day in the United States.

3 **Critiquing other people** in public is taboo in some cultures in the Far East. This will crop up in a variety of situations—most notably when you’re trying to get someone to volunteer for the “observer” function in a role play. Sometimes designating the most senior person as observer is the best route to go because he or she already critiques the performance

of his or her subordinates.

But the reluctance to criticize people occurs at other times as well. For instance, when you’re teaching a skill such as “demonstrating awareness,” you’re trying to get participants to acknowledge the behavior or feelings of another person.

An example would be saying, “It can be frustrating to wait for so long” to an angry customer who’s had to wait in line for some time. This skill comes in handy when you need to neutralize a potentially volatile situation.

But demonstrating your awareness of another person’s feelings would be totally inappropriate in Hong Kong or China. In these countries you’d never recognize another person’s emotions because you’d be embarrassing that person with such a public acknowledgment of feelings.

4 **Many people are surprised** to learn that you might have to culturally adapt American programs for British audiences, and vice versa. And I’m not just talking about spelling variations such as program versus programme.

It’s more than spelling, more than punctuation, and more than pronunciation. As the saying goes, we’re two countries divided by the same language. But to my way of thinking, there are actually two languages. If you keep that in mind, you’ll be more apt to avoid the pitfalls that snare those who blithely believe we speak the same tongue.

As Americans, we have a different culture and thus a different business culture than that of the U.K. Normal business practices here are often considered too forward, too informal, and too open by British businesspeople. So it’s easy to see why our business style doesn’t always work for them—especially in the context of a video episode that highlights a particular business environment or culture.

So don’t let the similar languages cause you to slip into the trap of thinking that an American training course will be completely acceptable to British audiences. Depending on the subject matter, your

program may need to be culturally adapted from beginning to end. When training in the U.K., you need to have the same kind of sensitivity that you would in countries where people do not speak English as their first language.

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My recommendations have to do with issues of saving face, cultural attitudes that influence feedback, use of your own professional strengths in an intercultural context, and problems of dealing with diversity right here in the United States.

Razak's recommendations

1 When you talk about saving face, right away people think you're talking about Japan and maybe a few other Asian countries. But "face" issues are important not only in the Far East—they're also an essential element of Middle Eastern, African (both East and West), and some European cultures such as those of Spain and Italy. But your best bet, no matter what country you're working in, is to assume that there are issues of face.

So what are face issues? What does "face" mean?

What "face" most readily translates into is this: not putting people in embarrassing situations. Anytime you're practicing skills, doing role plays—any sort of activity that's going to be publicly debriefed—you're asking people to behave in a way that invites criticism. And public criticism can be pretty darn embarrassing. So you've got to be very careful to practice skills and conduct role plays in a way that will allow participants to save face and leave their integrity intact.

One way to do this is to devise some private means of offering criticism—anonymous written criticism from fellow participants, or private, verbal, trainer-to-participant criticism. As with any kind of training, your choice of words is important. "Opportunities for improvement" sounds so much better than "what you did wrong."

In countries where you know that saving face is an important cultural issue, you're just generally going to want to proceed with a higher order of sensitivity in situations in which a person's integrity may be at stake.

2 Feedback is directly related to face. In cultures in which face is important, it may be difficult to get feedback on how the training is going, even if you beg for it. Why? The participants are respecting your face. They're too polite to embarrass you publicly even in situations in which the training might not be going well. You would lose face if they told you so. The extension of saving face is graciousness.

Sometimes feedback will come to you indirectly, so you need to listen closely for it. For instance, it might come in the form of a story where you're supposed to guess who you are in the story.

This happened to me one time when I was working with some Masai people in Tanzania. The leader or chief of the group began telling a rambling story that seemed completely unrelated to what we'd been doing. The story was about a man from another tribe who had stepped on some cultural norm and offended the chief's brother. The take-home message was this: Everybody should respect tribal hierarchy and local customs.

The chief ended his little saga by saying, "I just thought that was an interesting story." Abashed, I promptly asked the chief, "Was that me you were describing in the story?" The chief replied, "No, of course not." Well, of course it was me in the story. I'd blown some custom and this was his indirect means of telling me so.

When indirect feedback is not forthcoming, things become a little tougher. Once, as an icebreaker in a mixed-culture training session, I asked the participants to break into groups by culture—Germans with Germans, Chinese with Chinese, and so on. I then asked each group to come up with three or four things important to their culture that would help all of us get to know them and work together

for the next week.

Each cultural group got together and had a vigorous discussion. This is what the group from Thailand came back with:

- When a Thai smiles, it means he or she likes you.
- When a Thai smiles, it means he or she doesn't like you.
- When a Thai smiles, it means he or she agrees with you.
- When a Thai smiles, it means he or she disagrees with you.

Well, as you can imagine, feedback from this group was going to be somewhat difficult to get. But I gave them my broadest smile and asked, "OK, so what am I saying right now?" They really got a kick out of that.

In the United States the most important rules of feedback boil down to this: Square up and tell 'em what you know. I'm sure it's clear by now that in some Asian cultures, no matter how many times you ask participants, "How's it going?" the answer is always going to be, "It's going fine."

My solution, upon occasion, has been to get participants to break into groups and come up with two things that are going well and two things that are not going well. The groups then each assign a leader who is responsible for delivering the feedback of the group. Since it's not the group leader's own personal feedback, it becomes easier to deliver.

Some African countries have a similar indirect feedback system. If a tribe member has a problem with something I've done, that person tells the chief, who then relates the feedback to me—not very painful for the chief since someone else owns the feedback.

3 This may appear to fly in the face of everything I've said so far, but here it is anyway: Hold on to the personal characteristics that have made you an effective trainer—your sense of humor or your gregariousness, for example. But modify these things so that they continue to work for you in a different cultural setting.

You may have to change a sense of humor that's based on puns and double entendres to one in which

exaggeration and absurdity are key. The trick is to "be yourself"—but in a culturally acceptable way. Don't get all jammed up about being perfect—you won't be. You're bound to make mistakes. Ask for feedback from your cultural coach if you have one. That person will steer you in the right direction.

4 I'd like to broaden the discussion from cross-cultural training to what I call domestic cross-cultural training. I've recently begun working with several American companies on the issue of organizational diversity. Specifically, we looked at a pharmaceutical company in which women and minorities were leaving the firm at three times the rate that white men were leaving. Clearly, something was very wrong.

When the company discovered that the trend was costing it approximately \$250,000 per person in direct and indirect costs, it brought us in to ask the tough questions. What was this organization doing that was transmitting the message, "We don't allow diversity; we don't allow people to be different"?

What I realized from this project was that, as trainers, we should view all organizations as cultural entities, and teach others to see their work environments in this way. An American myth says that we are all equal and therefore we are all the same. If I buy that myth, then I can never really appreciate the race, sex, and ethnic differences that are our strength. I can never see others for who they really are. We are all equal, but we are not all the same. Nor should we be.

If we train people to view their work environments culturally, we'll be more successful at getting them to accept their innate differences. That would increase productivity—something about which American corporations are very concerned. Diversity is something that should never be stifled; we all gain from diversity.

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At Wilson Learning, we develop training programs that have been used in almost every corner of the world—from Great Britain, France, and Germany, to Sidney, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. Our programs are designed to be administered by Wilson Learning trainers and by internal company trainers who have been certified by us.

We take great care to ensure that our programs provide a consistent learning experience. We are so exacting because the classroom learning experience is crucial; it brings to life the concepts built into the print materials, videotapes, and role plays. This is why cultural adaptation is so crucial—it can make or break the learning experience.

So we've developed a system for culturally adapting programs that ensures that the learning sticks and that it's right for the culture. The very purpose of cultural adaptations is to make programs learner-friendly, to make sure there are no roadblocks in the way of the learner. We begin by getting the best translators available—and only people who speak the language as their native tongue.

Sheehan's recommendations

1 It may at first appear that "a good, tight translation" is all there is to exporting a U.S.-made training program to a foreign audience. Translation is an important part of the cultural adaptation process, but it's far from being the only thing. In point of fact, you can't really separate the two.

The translator plays a key role in culturally adapting programs. In fact, he or she begins by attending a live training program in English before attempting the translation. That provides the translator with a context from which to speak to the program designer. Then we run a pilot program in English, attended by 15 to 20 real clients who speak English as their second (or third) language.

After the pilot, the educational designer debriefs with the translator, writer, instructor, and pilot participants. They work on any

problems that crop up, examine whether the sequence of teaching makes sense, check to see if there were enough icebreakers and whether they were effective for that culture, and so forth. They also solicit stories, metaphors, experiences, and examples from the participants—anything that can be used in the program to increase the relevance of the training illustrations.

The designer and program writer then make changes based on the feedback and review the changes with the pilot participants to ensure that the changes do, in fact, improve the program. Next, the designer and writer prepare an English-language glossary of terms for the translator, whose job it is to find the foreign-language equivalents of these terms. The translator produces a rough translation that is reviewed by several pilot participants.

The next step is training the native-language instructors. That is followed by another pilot—this time administered in the native language of the participants. The designer and translator sit in on this pilot, ready to change the program sequence, examples, or any other element that doesn't work effectively.

The print training materials are word processed only after the designer, translator, native-language trainer, and pilot participants are satisfied with the translation. Word processing is done by a native speaker of the translation language—typos in any language only make you look sloppy. Only after all that do the materials go to press.

2 To ensure that the learning is effective, you need to understand how the job function of the participants is viewed in their native culture.

For example, suppose you're teaching selling skills to a group of Japanese participants who work in Japan. In the United States, it's perfectly appropriate and indeed advisable for salespeople to write introductory letters to high-level executives to gain entry to the company. In many cases, the higher the executive, the easier it is for the

salesperson to close the sale, since high-level executives have the decision-making authority needed to authorize purchases.

In Japan, however, writing letters to important company officials would be completely inappropriate. It's not unusual in Japan for a salesperson to leave his or her business card with a receptionist every week for months before being granted an interview with the desired person.

It's also important to understand that the status of different job functions varies by country. Japanese companies often hire salespeople directly out of college. Knowing that, Wilson Learning designed an introductory module to the selling skills program that explained basic Japanese business etiquette. That was absolutely essential for participants to learn before taking on the larger challenge of learning effective selling skills.

3 It's particularly important to pay attention to the measurement element of the training—

both pre- and post-seminar. The translation and cultural adaptation of the printed instrument can pose some unexpected challenges, but it's crucial to make sure that it is done well.

We've developed 15 different databases that enable us to measure German behavior against German norms, French behavior against French norms, and so on. If we didn't have them, our measurement results wouldn't provide accurate pictures of the skills participants have learned.

For example, suppose you want to measure the warmth, approachability, and friendliness of a salesperson. If you measure an Italian salesperson against English norms, that person would probably be rated as uncontrollably emotional. Likewise, a German salesperson measured against French norms might be judged humorless and cold.

So you see why it's essential to develop measurement instruments and databases that accurately reflect cultural norms. Building the databases is what takes time—we often need to test about 500 people in a single culture in order to develop a culturally reliable database.

In Japan, we also discovered something very interesting. It seems that culturally, there is a huge reluctance to ever rate anyone at the top end of the scale. The Japanese simply do not deal in superlatives the way Americans do. To compensate for that, we decided that in Japan, a rating of "4" really equalled a "7" in the United States. In essence, we had to "re-norm" the scoring program to make sense of the test results.

4 The last recommendation concerns training a mixed cultural group: Unless there's a learning reason to make people uncomfortable, don't.

Be aware of the effects of jet lag and a change in diet on the participants. For example, don't make the mistake of training Japanese in the United States and not serving a rice meal for a week. They will not be as receptive to instruction as they otherwise could be.

During breaks, offer mineral

water, not just soda, and savory foods as well as sweets—for example, hard rolls and cheeses in addition to donuts.

Adhere to the cultural norms of the country in which the training is being conducted. In the United States, schedule a one-hour lunch; in France, a two-hour lunch. In Spain, expect to break for two or three hours for lunch but then work until 10 in the evening.

Keep an eagle eye out for fidgeting that may signal the need for a cigarette—people of other cultures smoke far more these days than we do in the United States. It's the instructor's job to research these cultural norms ahead of time in order to meet participant expectations and ensure comfort.

When training a mixed cultural group, you'll need to choose a single language in which to conduct the training. So it's advisable to send out the program materials well in advance to give participants more than enough time to read through them. Include an English-language glossary of terms that's brutally accurate and leaves no room for misunderstanding.

Since there are precious few—if any—universal norms in a mixed-culture group, abide strictly by the ones that you, yourself, choose to set. If you say the break will last 15 minutes, make sure it does. If you have to make changes, be explicit about them. Giving participants a sense of the rules and then respecting those rules will make trainees more comfortable. And that will increase their learning potential.

This month's "Four by Four" was compiled and edited by Pat McCarthy, a training consultant in Norwalk, Connecticut. If you have ideas for future topics or would like to be interviewed, write to Catherine M. Petrini, Four by Four, Training & Development Journal, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

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