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Cross-Cultural Training, Values

Making Diversity More Manageable

BY CLIFFORD CLARKE

Diversity trainers face many cultural variables that can affect training. One way to manage the differences is to categorize them according to universal value orientations.

Cultural variables strongly influence global training. The diversity that exists makes us, as trainers, wonder whether we can be effective across even two cultures, much less in a classroom of people from many backgrounds.

One way to make diversity more manageable is to categorize the cultural variables that can affect training according to the universal value orientations described in the 1961 book, *Variations in Value Orientations,* by anthropologists Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck.

The authors identified five cultural value orientations shared by all human beings:

- our relationship to nature
- our relationship to the supernatural
- our relationship to other human beings
- our time orientation
- our activity orientation.

Using Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value orientations as a framework, we can analyze and separate a conglomerate of concepts into manageable, applicable parts.

Our relationship to nature

In the early 1980s, Fuji-Xerox hired my firm, Clarke Consulting Group, to help develop a new educational business department in Japan. Fuji-Xerox wanted to license my company's intercultural training programs and sell them to Japan-based businesses.

During the project, my colleagues and I learned some important cultural differences that caused us to reassess the way we initially conducted training for Japanese businesspeople. Those differences are due to different cultural views regarding people's relationship to nature.

From the Japanese Shinto perspective, proper form is contained within nature, and nature is synonymous with harmony. When we were conducting train-the-trainer workshops at Fuji-Xerox, we assumed that when the workshops were completed the Japanese trainers would customize our materials in their classrooms for the benefit of participants, depending on the participants' expressed needs.

We also assumed the Japanese trainers would be extemporaneous. But we found that they expected to "blend" into a rigorous manual and follow it to the letter. The trainers also expected to follow an exact time schedule and work through all of the material without veering too far from the lesson plan, even to respond to trainees' questions.

What's more, we American trainers were criticized for our behavior in the training sessions. We thought we were being professional. But to the Japanese trainers, anything that wasn't in the manual was considered "out of form." From the Japanese perspective, harmony in training comes from conforming. But our trainers from the United States felt as if the Japanese expected them to be robots.

The example of Fuji-Xerox shows how people's cultural views on their relationship with forms in nature can influence their ideas about form or the way things are done in other areas.

To some people, there is only one correct way to do something. That doesn't necessarily mean that they seek control. The Japanese culture and many other cultures expect people to exhibit the proper form, because they believe that one should be in harmony with nature, not that one should seek to be in control. In such cultures, if a trainer's behavior and activities lack form, trainees may think the trainer is irresponsible and even misrepresentative of the training profession.

The format of the materials also can influence trainees' receptivity to training and the trainer. In addition, trainees' opinion on whether the discussion has veered off course can

influence whether they think the trainer is following the expected form.

People in cultures that emphasize harmony with nature tend to see metaphors and generalizations as distractions from the harmony between thought and action. As trainees, they are likely to find abstract and conceptual definitions meaningless.

Another factor is the different meanings and values words have in different cultures. For effective communication, idiomatic expressions and training terms require definitions related to trainees' own experience.

Trainees whose culture has taught them to expect a program that is highly integrated with their environment are likely to question the relevance of training that isn't based on their own experience. And they will want the taught skills to apply to job performance. Conversely, trainees whose culture has taught them to expect a loosely integrated program tend to prefer packaged training that focuses on overall growth and development.

People from cultures that seek a high degree of integration with the environment may not learn effectively when the learning environment fails to meet their expectations. They may think the training room is too cold, the furniture is too hard, and so forth. People from other cultures are less influenced by their environment and can learn in a variety of conditions.

Our relationship to the supernatural

Universal value orientations aren't necessarily static. For example, Japan's burgeoning interest in the Western notion of management by objective—which involves incentives and rewards—is due in part to the Japanese culture's changing views about people's relationship to the supernatural or spiritual.

Traditionally, spiritualism in Japan has emphasized relativism, the theory that knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the mind and conditions of knowledge. But since World War 2, the Japanese have experienced less spiritual unity. Young Japanese have begun seeking immediate rewards based on their achievements, chipping away at Japan's traditional system of reward by age and rank. In place of relativistic values, Japanese businesses have begun to champion fairness as a basis for compensation. They have established objective, companywide standards for measuring employee performance. These standards don't take into account such relativistic considerations as age and rank.

In contrast, many U.S. companies are beginning to look at performance-management systems that emphasize personal objectives and negotiation. While the Japanese are moving toward the traditional American absolute value orientation regarding the supernatural—in which values are fundamental and free of external considerations—relativism is gaining a hold in the United States. Those divergent trends have implications for global trainers.

Three Principles for Analyzing Cultural Values

- All possibilities exist in every culture.
- All values are positive in their own context.
- All cultures fight against change.

People's views on their relationship to the supernatural or spiritual influence several variables in the area of training design. One area is standards.

Trainees whose culture has taught them to believe in absolutes tend to prefer comprehensive training goals and skills. Anything else causes them to question the goals' authenticity and the trainer's authority. Such trainees think that the only means to measure excellence achieved through training is through evaluations based on proven criteria.

Other trainees may come from cultures in which values are defined in terms of experience, not goals. For them, there are no absolutes to measure against performance. The criteria for excellence are always changing. Standards or models are variable, depending on the situation. People assigned to overseas jobs often receive training in the behavioral standards of the country to which they're assigned. But cultural norms can vary according to time, place, and situation. Once the trainees arrive at their destinations and observe the variations, they may think their trainers led them up a blind alley.

People's cultural values regarding the supernatural or spiritual can influence their views about professionalism. Trainees with absolute value orientations tend to judge a trainer's professionalism in the same way they judge the excellence of the training—by comparing the trainer's behavior against absolute, ideal criteria.

Trainees whose cultures emphasize a more relativistic view of the supernatural tend not to believe in abstract, absolute definitions of professionalism. They seek to achieve professionalism by being in harmony with their surroundings.

Overall, trainees tend to assess training content as either on target or irrelevant. But their opinion of the content can be influenced by their views on people's relationship to the supernatural or spiritual. Typically, trainees decide whether the training content represents facts, opinions, or feelings. Their judgment can cause them either to reject or to accept the training and the trainer. Trainees who believe in absolutes tend to view training content as either right or wrong. When a trainer doesn't convey the facts, the trainees tend to lose confidence in both the trainer and the learning opportunity.

People who have a relativistic view regarding their relationship to the supernatural tend to require more instructions—the directions and procedures communicated by the trainer—than do those with an absolute view. If trainees with a relativistic orientation don't get the amount of direction they think is necessary, they may distrust or lose respect for the trainer. Such trainees also expect the trainer to give instructions that create an environment with which they can be in harmony. In their view, a lack of direction destroys a trainer's effectiveness.

Trainees who have a more absolute view regarding their relationship to the supernatural require fewer instructions. They even tend to

question the validity of the instructions they're given. Such trainees tend to pursue perfection or a higher authority on their own.

The role of the trainer regarding all of the cultural variables related to our relationship to the supernatural represents various degrees of authority—from questionable to perfect.

Our relationship to other human beings

The cultural influence on our relationship to others is exemplified by this case study:

A large chemical company in the United States wanted to transplant its visioning program to its branch in Asia. In past programs, the trainer had asked trainees from all organizational levels such questions as, "Where do you see the company in five years?" But that methodology conflicts with the value orientation of many Asian cultures regarding relationships among people. Many Asian workers think companies should be guided by their leaders. Asians view employees' roles as hierarchical and show respect for the hierarchy by expecting top-level administrators to lead. In such cultures, asking employees to help develop the company's vision—before asking the leaders—is considered inappropriate. Visioning needs to start with the leaders and then move down through the organization, department by department. Last, lower-level workers help develop a vision that matches the leaders' larger vision.

The solution to the conflict at the chemical company was to rally workers around a centralized corporate vision, instead of putting them at risk by asking them to participate in visioning first. Success relied on recognizing different value orientations toward human relationships.

People's views on the relationships between themselves and other human beings influence their sense of self-identity and self-image. People's cultural views about personal relationships also influence their intimacy with others and whether they feel a sense of inclusion in group situations. In training, such interdependence relies largely on the relationship between the trainer and trainees, as well as the roles of each.

What are the role parameters? Is it appropriate for trainers and trainees to socialize outside of the classroom? In some cultures, the trainer and trainees are considered equals. But in other cultures, the trainer's and trainees' roles are formalized and complex.

Regarding customized training, some trainees' cultures may have taught them to believe they are unique. In such cases, trainees tend to expect the training to be tailored to their needs. When trainees' cultures have taught them to feel part of a group with the same needs, they expect little or no customized training.

Holism is the degree to which the trainer and trainees expect their relationship to address three modes: thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Some trainers think training requires a

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holistic approach, focusing simultaneously on all three modes. Trainers with other cultural perspectives may think training should focus on just one mode, as in the case of traditional language programs. Such programs don't take into account participants' values, roles, and relationships. The essential mode is behavior; that is, whether trainees learn to speak the language being taught.

Another important variable in training is the language people use in relationships. Language can convey a variety of expectations or destroy a variety of assumptions. In some cultures, the spoken language of relationships is a great equalizer. Trainers whose native language treats everyone equally may resist the distance created when they are required to train in a language that respects hierarchy. Should they mitigate the distance by changing the language they're speaking? Or, should they respect the distance by adapting their attitudes and values?

In many situations, trainers may be forced to choose between living by their own values and conforming to those of another culture.

Our time orientation

Here is an example of how cultural time orientation can affect training. Procter and Gamble once gave Japanese trainees several months of classroom technical training before sending them to the production line to watch the technology in action.

The trainees were supposed to gain a cognitive understanding of the technical process before they began using it. P&G expected the trainees to learn the process piece-by-piece in the classroom, memorizing the concepts. Then they were expected to be able to put the pieces together when they saw, on the line, how the process actually worked. Unfortunately, many of the trainees slept through the four months of classes. Japanese people like to learn by observation, and they like to practice new processes. The trainees complained that they needed to be watching the line in order to understand.

The Japanese trainees were expressing their own value orientation regarding time, or the sequence in which training activities should occur. The trainees weren't ready to learn until they were on the line. Of course, then they had to review the four months of classroom learning.

Two important aspects of time orientation are history and tradition. Some cultures value history and tradition. Other cultures value change; they expect younger generations to do things differently. Some cultures treat time as a precious commodity; others see time as endless. Such cultural differences can influence trainees' views on the quantity of training needed and the training's timeliness.

How much training is appropriate? How much training can people take in one sitting? Is this the right time for a training intervention? Should the trainer create a training schedule based on trainees' need for improvement or on their readiness for learning? Once

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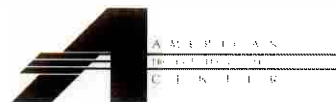

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training begins, what kind of pace will produce the best results? What if trainees are multicultural and the pace is too fast for some and too slow for others?

Another aspect to consider is trainees' degree of participation. People whose cultures require communications to be spaced apart may be unable to interrupt participants whose culture sanctions simultaneous talking. The trainer must decide whether it's necessary for all trainees to participate and to participate equally.

Generally, trainers tend to behave according to their degree of awareness of the cultural contexts in which they live. For example, sensitivity training was popular in the United States in the 1960s. Trainers declared that "there-and-then" discussions were irrelevant and that trainees should discuss only the "here and now."

Sensitivity training forced many trainees to disengage from their valued contexts. In future-oriented cultures in which change is valued, disengaging might be an easy task. But in past-oriented cultures in which history and tradition are valued, people may think that disregarding the "there and then" is ludicrous. Clearly, the degree to which training incorporates trainees' cultural contexts can influence the trainer's success.

Trainees' cultural time orientations also influence their expectations about the desired degree of flexibility in the training schedules. Some people aren't receptive to learning without first understanding things theoretically. In such cases, the training must begin with information and knowledge. Other people aren't receptive to learning unless they're shown demonstrations and allowed to practice tasks, as in the example of P&G's Japanese trainees. Such learners want the concepts and summaries to come later.

So, should trainers design training sequences that match their own expectations? Or, should they design training that matches trainees' expectations?

And how can trainers design useful training sequences for culturally diverse trainees who have conflicting expectations?

Our activity orientation

Trainees' culturally based activity orientation can influence their need for action, their participatory styles, and the ways in which they process or analyze communications.

Some people are acculturated to need a lot of action; others are more "being-oriented." The first group views passivity as wasteful. The second group thinks a certain amount of passivity is required in order to integrate what is being learned. Trainees' cultural perspectives can even affect their expectations of how many exercises, games, role plays, simulations, and so forth the training provides.

Some of the most popular training programs in Japan involve structured physical activities in an outdoor environment, similar to the Outward Bound programs in the United States. Many adventure-learning programs focus on teamwork. Participants are expected to learn the principles of teamwork and then transfer the learning into organizational dynamics when they return to the workplace.

> How is our message cutting through the maze of variables?

American participants tend to appreciate the activities themselves and typically process them into key learnings to apply on the job. Their value orientation toward activity enables them to examine their own and their co-workers' actions and behaviors as metaphors for what happens in the workplace. They can critique themselves and their co-workers and learn from the experience.

The Japanese value system requires one to conform to a role model. Instead of processing the principles represented in action training, the Japanese tend to view the adventure trainers as role models for the purposes of conformity. Japanese trainees tend to be uncomfortable with the idea of doing something just to see how it feels. The Japanese tend to think that risking their well-being in adventure training may reveal too much about themselves. Such revelations occur rarely in Japanese adventure programs, but when they do, Japanese participants are likely to avoid each other back at work. Consequently, key learnings don't transfer to the workplace. Yet, the programs are popular in Japan, mainly because Japanese workers enjoy the chance to escape the office and be outdoors.

Another aspect of activity orientation is style. Some trainees may think that an assertive trainer is confident. Trainees from a different culture may think an assertive trainer is self-centered. Trainees' different styles of participation also differ from culture to culture: whether to speak, when to speak, and how to speak. Does one jump into the discussion and challenge? Or, does one show more "respect"?

Since the 1960s, a lot of training in the United States has involved processing—the analysis of communication among training participants. By analyzing how we communicate, we bring focus to a training event. Most American trainees feel comfortable discussing process. In other cultures, discussing process is considered rude. It's more important to discuss the topic, not the way people are speaking to each other. People whose culturally based activity orientation is more passive or being-oriented tend to think that processing causes trainees to become self-consciousness and uncomfortable.

Activity-oriented trainees consider it essential to get results from a single training event. Being-oriented trainees tend to view a training event as only one in a series of events with short-term satisfaction and long-term benefits. They're more interested in the process than the results.

Guiding principles

As trainers, we may wonder whether our message is cutting through the maze of cultural variables. We may be tempted to view universal value orientations either as points along a continuum or as dichotomies. There are dangers to both views. Both are static. And both encourage stereotypes and negative attributions.

To avoid the pitfalls, we should

take into account some anthropological principles before we apply the value orientations to cultural variables in our training. Three important principles:

- All possibilities exist in every culture.
- All values are positive in their own context.
- All cultures fight against change.

First, all values can exist in every culture. We might place the values of different cultures along a continuum on which they seem to contrast, but in every culture all variations of a given value can exist. When we say that two cultures are different, we actually are describing the value orientations of most of the people in each culture. Others in those cultures may have other value orientations. Consequently, a knowledge of universal value orientations should be used only as a tool for exploring, examining, and analyzing cultures. Such knowledge shouldn't be used to predict actual behavior.

Second, all values are positive in their own contexts. That means that differences are valuable in their own right. Unfortunately, many of us still seem to aspire to the melting pot. Instead, we should realize that differences present opportunities for stimulating thought, creativity, and problem solving.

Last, all cultures resist change. To survive, cultures generally choose the status quo. Still, cultures are always changing. Most diversity trainers know that change is inevitable. We can influence the changes, and the culture of the trainees can influence us.

As we apply the universal value orientations, let us remember to avoid stereotyping, to appreciate differences, and to champion change. ■

Clifford Clarke *is chairman of the board and CEO of the Clarke Consulting Group, 3 Lagoon Drive, Suite 230, Redwood City, CA 94065.*

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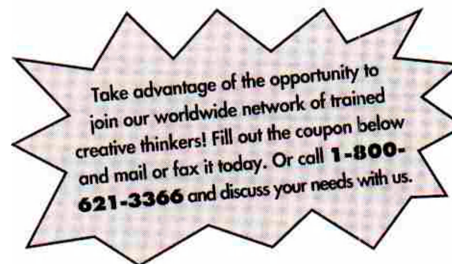

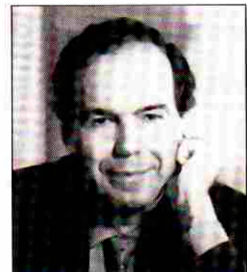

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