

# Training Employees For Service Abroad

## The need for understanding human interaction — a suggested use for sensitivity

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In this period of history when so many Americans representing both business and Government are strategically located around the world, I find that I am somewhat apprehensive about the kind of relationships these million and a quarter well intentioned people are developing among the nationals of a given locale. On the basis of my own observations, as I traveled around the world two years ago, I continue to be uneasy about the disservice which some Americans abroad do us by their failure to comprehend the nature of cross-cultural relationships.

In order to think about it, I find that it is helpful for me to reflect on the nature of relationships which we consider acceptable among ourselves. I am sure that we carry over into our contacts around the world, the same concept of

relationship which is natural and normal for us at home. And if this is so, it may give us a clue to an aspect of training that I feel needs attention.

By definition, I think we tend to characterize our society as a fluid one. However, a number of writers suggest that we as a people are becoming less fluid and more structured in our thinking and behaving. They point out that we have become less tolerant of people who dress differently than the norm, who question concepts that are generally accepted as matters of national policy, and who in any way show uneasiness about the more fundamental concepts of our society. By more fundamental concepts, I mean our attitude toward work which is so compelling that we have little if any feeling of relatedness to a lazy or non-driven person. We

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are uneasy in the presence of someone who is not time conscious—his attitude is an attack upon our conviction that time is money. And we are impatient with those who are not ready to accept every new device that comes along. As a nation of inventors and developers we thrive on employing those gadgets which lead to greater efficiency, and individuals who do not share such popular attitudes are often suspect. The list of such fundamental concepts is much longer of course, but I think these are enough to indicate that for most of us these concepts seem “right.” The problem gains perspective if we are able to recognize that if something is “right” for us, it is sometimes difficult for us to feel at ease with those who are not willing, or perhaps not able to accept our standards.

This problem may give us no serious trouble in the circles in which we move in our own country, but it may well be the source of many difficulties which we Americans may encounter when we go to live among people in a vastly different culture. It is easier to observe rigidity traits among the people of other lands and I remember that I was fascinated in Japan with what appeared to be a fetish on the part of the people there toward mechanical precision. Their involvement took several forms, but I was particularly interested in the enormous pride the Japanese took in the punctuality of their trains. Of course, I think that trains and other forms of public conveyances should be run on time. But I found I was bothered and uncomfortable with the importance that my acquaintances placed upon the clock-like precision of their trains. It seemed to me that they had endowed a mechanical thing, such as their remarkable

and admirable railroad system, with life, and instead of thinking of the train as a servant of man, they thought of themselves as being dependent upon the precision of the railroad's operation to give their life character, pride and meaning.

Maybe this is unfair, but it seems to me that this factor cannot be overlooked if one wants to get some idea of what the people in a distant land, such as Japan, are like. It isn't my purpose to discuss Japan, but in trying to look at the kind of emotional baggage we carry around with us, it may be easier to look first at some other traits which I believe are characteristics of the Japanese and which make their adjustment to our country most difficult, whether they come as business men, or students.

I was surprised and perhaps dismayed to discover that in Japan, most relationships are stylized and carefully prescribed. A boy in Japan is made aware early of the status level into which he is born, and he is taught early who the people are above him to whom he must always show deference, and he knows who the people are that will always shower special attention and recognition on him. In one way this simplifies life. There is never any question as to how one is to be received or just what he must do in receiving others. However, this makes for a very rigid society, and at the same time provides enormous security for the individual. But as I interpret all that I saw, the individual in Japan trades his right to be a free and spontaneous person, for the comfortable security of knowing where he is at all times in his relationships with school mates, with business associates, and in family social affairs.

Along this line, it is no secret that many students from Japan seek in vain, on their arrival in the United States, for a pattern of rigid structure which they believe exists among members of our own society. It is "right" for them that all societies are organized along rigid patterns, because not having known anything else, there is no other way. They cannot conceive of a more fluid society because the need for personal security which has not been met or answered on a personal basis, but rather by the structure of their society, is as great as ever by the time they have reached majority. Once the imprint has been made upon young people to depend upon something outside themselves for security in relationships, there is not much chance that any other procedure can ever be accepted. I have known students in our country from Japan who have withdrawn from all contacts with Americans, after struggling in vain to find our supportive pattern of social intercourse because it is beyond their power of conception to believe that we do not have a structured social pattern. They withdraw not only because they cannot find a way of operating that provides security, but because they are forced to conclude that they are stupid because they cannot find what obviously must exist. It is simply impossible for them to believe that a people such as Americans can function on a less rigid basis than that which is normal for them.

While I was in Japan I discussed the orientation process with a number of official Japanese and Americans in an effort to discover what kind of training was being provided the Japanese before they embarked for the United States. I discovered that all of the verbal and

written admonitions given to such Japanese stressed the fact that the American cultural society is more fluid than their own. Therefore, it seemed reasonably clear to me that such an illustration underscores the need to discover other methods of training people for an overseas experience which goes much deeper than merely expecting the written or spoken word to convey ideas. In this instance, the comprehensive ability of the intellect simply refuses to function because the whole structure of the individual is threatened by a concept that is in the area of personal subjective support. Emotionally, he knows that he cannot function in a more fluid society so his mind ignores the fact that the culture pattern is different in the United States, and for him it does not exist. Or to put it another way, this points up the fact that the concept of what is "right" and necessary is a function of our emotional life, and no amount of intellectualizing about the need for change, in facing new situations, is permitted to penetrate our protective shell.

### ***Need To Relate To People***

I think it is obvious by now that I have been using the illustration of the more rigid nature of Japanese society to suggest that even though we Americans do not have the same confrontations when we go abroad, we may have difficulties that we do not care to look at. In other words, when we go to a foreign land, we may be refusing unconsciously to relate to the people around us, in the same way that the Japanese find themselves unable to function in our social climate. Our whole sense of what is "right" and normal may be so threatened by the unfamiliar habits,

customs and mores of the people with whom we go to live that the confusion is not often sufficiently cleared away with only an intellectual understanding of what other people are like. Since we as a people are not as accustomed to as many social restraints in terms of social intercourse as are found in other areas of the world, it may be that we conveniently downgrade the importance of tradition and social forces which the people around us in a foreign land depend upon for their security. And in the process of dismissing as ridiculous or unimportant their social mores, we thereby reject the people we must deal with as socially and spiritually impoverished and conclude erroneously that they are eagerly waiting to learn from us a better way of organizing their business, educational and social life.

As must be clear by now, I am convinced that we need to question the emphasis we place upon filling Americans full of facts and concepts about the people and the culture to which they are being assigned. It is important to know their language, too. But if our own heritage creates the easy assumption that the reason we ought to know about the habit patterns, and social mores of the people in a strange land is for the purpose of enabling us to help them change to a way of thinking, behaving and responding which is similar to our own, we are a long way from being really helpful—in fact we may be doing more harm than good. We may smile indulgently at the Japanese for being so dependent upon a pattern of social intercourse which is intricate and stratified. But it may be hard for us to see that we in our way are equally dependent upon having the world around us per-

form in familiar and customary ways. And we are far more intent as a race, than are the Japanese, upon seeing that we change the environment we are in to meet our needs.

A friend of mine who spent several years in India as a technical advisor found himself caught between the subtleties of Indian life and his own desire to accomplish, in the only way he knew how, the task that he was assigned. At the conclusion of his two-year stay, he wrote in part to his superior in Washington as follows: "I may be mistaken, but my limitations in meeting my assigned duties have seemed to me far more often, to be due to my ineptitude in communication and in human relations and in sensing the way my colleagues looked at things, than to my ignorance of the subject matter or research or statistics or of educational information in general." It seems to me that this kind of statement only spotlights the need for urgency in discovering and putting into operation the kind of training that would help well meaning, conscientious people, such as this, be better prepared for the nature of the shock they are to receive when they go overseas to live. Somehow, this man needed to face realistically, before he went to India, that by the very nature of his being non-Indian he would have limitations in meeting his assigned duties, that would not go away by merely wishing it so. If his concept of communication could have been more than the transmittal of objective information, his personal satisfactions and his usefulness from a technical point of view would have been much greater.

I realize that often we can hear only what we want to hear. And our whole

sense of personal worth is so tied up with our social and cultural patterns, that it is hard to separate the two. Yet, I am convinced that we need to find a way to help people who are going abroad, face the fact that far greater emphasis needs to be placed on the change that must take place inside them, than on how to change the outer conditions in a non-American society. Without this concept of inner change, the springs of creativity will not function, the ability to communicate will never develop, and most efforts to establish interpersonal relations will lead to frustration, hostility and perhaps rejection.

### **What Can Be Done?**

So far I have indicated that unless a person going into a different culture can be relatively free from personal apprehension, he will have great difficulty in being creative in the carrying out of his assignment. By creativity, I mean the ability to be objective in assessing the society about him, while at the same time being subjective about himself. When an individual is willing to face the fact that everything about him cries out to have the others move in such a way as to make him feel comfortable, and yet be able to recognize that this is impossible, he is then free to find ways of working with the real facts at hand to come up with something that is new, untried, and doubtless creative.

Second, I believe that the problem of communication is more a function of our ability to admit to ourselves what our feeling response is to any situation, than it is the words we use, or the techniques of maneuvering others, or our

ability to know what is good for the other fellow.

And, thirdly, I have suggested that if anyone is to have a good experience in a different culture than his own, he should feel relationships with the people with whom he must work or do business. There is little chance of relationship with other human beings unless we are willing to share, first of all, something about ourselves with the other fellow. This is a problem for most people in our culture, since our insecurities in most situations are so great that we instinctively hide ourselves while attempting to trick the other person into revealing something about himself. Our chief difficulty is that we gain no knowledge or experience in sharing much of anything about ourselves with people even in our own culture. For the most part, we are not in tune with the storehouse of vibrant, dynamic and ever present feelings we are having in response to every situation that takes place during our waking hours. We are locked in a culture pattern which seems to force us to play always a very dangerous game—the game of guessing what the other person will do and how he will feel in response of an action of ours. And then on the basis of our guess about the other person, we make tremendously important decisions.

### **Sensitivity Training Suggested**

In all seriousness, I am suggesting that to provide training for living in another culture, far more emphasis is needed on helping a given individual discover more about the person he is, than upon factual material purporting to describe

the way other people operate. This type of training is sometimes known as Sensitivity training. However, I think we need to be clear about the emphasis which is stressed when we talk about sensitivity. It is my observation that in many places, the word sensitivity is used to indicate training designed to help an individual become more sensitive to the other members of a group or to the people with whom he is most often in contact. I am convinced, on the other hand, that the stress needs to be placed on how we can become more sensitive to that which is really ourselves, to discovering what our real and unique reactions are to every new situation that arises, and to become sufficiently at home with this storehouse of information to permit us to use it appropriately at the time we are reacting to situations, rather than hours or days later when conditions and circumstances have changed.

If we are to discover for ourselves what it means to be creative, what it means to communicate, or what it means to have satisfactory and rewarding interpersonal relations, it seems that we have no other choice than to begin with ourselves. We cannot demand, as so many of us who are products of our own culture seem to believe, that others provide the climate that will permit us to be creative, that others share themselves with us so that we will know that we are in communication, or that others accept our terms for establishing relationships. No matter how subtly we make demands of this nature, we are, by the very nature of demands, developing a load of hostility in the other person which daily compounds the difficulties

that wastefully consume our time and cause us to report at the end of our assignment in a foreign land as my friend from India, "my limitations in meeting my assigned duties are due to my ineptitude in communication and in human relations."

My proposal is, therefore, that we invite individuals who are planning to take an assignment in a foreign land, to meet regularly for a period of time before they leave home. The group should not exceed 15 in number. We should utilize the techniques of sensitivity training to help these individuals become more aware of their own ability to communicate with others, to relate with others, to be creative in difficult situations with others. This presupposes, of course, our willingness to place the emphasis in this type of training on each individual becoming more sensitive to his inner feelings, or in other words, to who and what he is. This assumes that we are in agreement with the concept that insights of this sort are discovered only by the individual himself. That we recognize that no amount of reading, no amount of individual meditation and concentration, no amount of case studies of the problems and situations of others, will in themselves help people in our culture become more aware of themselves, more sensitive to their own feelings, and more conscious of their need to accept responsibility for themselves.

This implies a recognition that all learning about ourselves which is significant is subjective in nature. And that an objective analysis of someone else's behavior and reaction is not really applicable in helping me discover "what's with me." Therefore, my concept of

training is supported by the belief that all learning of a subjective nature, which is learning about ourselves, comes through experience. Hence the need for a group in which interaction can take place. And interaction is more than the exchange of platitudes, objective concepts and theoretical knowledge. It is the sharing of that which is occurring in the here and now on the feeling level with other members of the group. It is the observing of what that sharing does to free one from blocks in communication, or what it does to open doors of communication with others. It is the recognition that one cannot escape the possibility of pain if real learning of a subjective nature is to take place.

It is the opportunity to test out for oneself in a group situation the basis of relationship which carries a recognizable concept of respect—not only respect we develop for others, but the way we can know and appreciate respect from others.

Although I am emphasizing the need for the use of a group because interaction is possible only when there are others present with whom one can interact, I am not proposing that it is necessary for the purpose of helping others discover more about their feeling to move into the realm of group therapy. I am convinced that there is such a wealth of interactive material within any group in terms of the here and now relationships, that there is no need in terms of basic learning to dig into the past, or to discover the reason why a person may have this or that feeling. Or to put it another way, training means actual experience in becoming aware of

the greater depths that are always present in any here and now interactive experience. Therapy means the uncovering of forces, factors and concepts which cause us to behave in a certain way. I am interested only with the tremendous possibilities for individual growth inherent in the here and now training situation.

In the final analysis, I suspect that we Americans are as much a product of the locked-in forces in our culture pattern as are other people, in their way, products of their own culture. It is always so much easier to see the weaknesses and oddities of other people than it is to see our own. But a people, such as we Americans, who have had a long successful period of changing the world outside ourselves to meet our own needs, are not in a very sound position in terms of relating to others of a different culture. In fact, we are psychologically prepared to make enemies wherever we go. Therefore, I am convinced that if we are to train effectively any of our citizens who are to go to a foreign land to have a good relationship, to be effective in communicating with the people of another land, or of being creative in his assignment, we must begin with the individual in terms of helping him discover who and what he is in contrast to putting our efforts primarily in training him to know about and understand through some objective device the people in a distant land. And the key to unlocking the unconscious vice-like grip of our own locked-in cultural pattern, is to become more aware of who we are as human beings fully endowed with our own individual, personal and unique feelings.