

## CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

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### Not Thinking Like You

If you are called upon in your career to train in foreign lands....terrific. What a wonderful and broadening experience. It is not always easy to find just the right references or resources for trainers, and "getting it right" the first time is essential. I have put together some tips and references as well as my own personal experiences, having traveled some 200,000 miles in the last 4 years to Singapore, Australia, Japan, France, Germany, England, Belgium, Greece, Puerto Rico, Canada, and Brazil.

### Rule #1

Don't think like you do! The easiest and most difficult thing to do. Be aware that sometimes: "you just don't know what you don't know." We have assumptions about what good training is, what good instructional design is and how to facilitate. All these practices might work fine in the US but may not fit your international customer.

Marquardt and Engel have a great expression regarding delivery of training programs around the world with: "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape." Open your mind to flexing the content based on local preferences and customs.

### Rule #2

Wherever possible, talk to your counter-part or colleagues in the country you will visit before you go. Ask specific questions about the status levels of your participants, the mix, and how best to deal with issues of power. You might include the highest manager as a resource in the class and avoid putting him or her in a position that might usurp their authority. Ask about role-plays, large group sharing and other activities you have in mind. Get the local professional to give you guidance.

### Rule #3

Err on the side of politeness. There is not a guide book large enough to explain every interaction you might find. Use your best trainer skills (and manners) to confirm your understanding, validate someone's experience, encourage and enthusiastically present the material.

### Some Additional Tips

"Americans assume that given an opportunity, everyone else would be just like themselves."  
Edward Stewart, American Cultural Patterns.

How easy it is to assume such things! The Hermes study by Geert Hofstede helps professionals look at the world through four areas:

- a. Power Distance -the degree to which society accepts the idea that power is to be distributed unequally (e.g. the manager is expected to have the answers and make decisions vs. there can be consensus or input from less experienced professionals)
- b. Individualism -the degree to which a society believes individuals' beliefs and actions should be independent of collective thought and action (e.g. the lone voice has value vs. traditions and precedents guide us)

c. Uncertainty/Risk Avoidance -the degree to which society feels threatened by ambiguous situations and tries to avoid them by providing rules or requesting detailed information before making decisions (e.g. we need time, ritual, and a formality that we are accustomed to vs. new ideas by people who are not authenticated) and finally;

d. Task Orientation -the degree to which a society focuses on assertiveness, task achievement and acquisition of things as opposed to the quality of life and relationships (e.g. we build and expect relationships to dictate credibility vs. someone having a great idea and driving it)

The degree of emphasis in each of these four areas will vary by regions of the world. Target your questions to your host to discern how these 4 areas are interpreted in the country you will be visiting.

There is a wonderful book: Global Human Resource Development by Michael J. Marquardt and Dean W. Engel (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ ISBN#0-13-357930) I think the book is a “must-have” for international trainers. It is filled with practical design and delivery tips. The following tips I use religiously:

a. If you are unable to speak the local language, try at least to learn some of the basic phrases (good morning, thank you etc.) The trainees will be pleased with your interest in their language.

b. Be sure to learn and use the culture’s body language and non-verbal cues.

c. If the program is conducted in English and English is not the first language of the participants, be sure to assess their language abilities and respond accordingly. Do not assume they understand you. Many can understand the written better than the spoken word. Therefore use more visuals; flipcharts, PowerPoint, overheads etc. Shorten your lectures and encourage break-out sessions in their native language.

d. Avoid jargon and colloquialisms like: “Does anyone have feedback?” Feedback is not a word recognized in many cultures.

e. Speak slowly and clearly. American accents are difficult for most.

f. Plan for the class to take longer based on the above. Be prepared to cut parts of the class to its essential elements.

g. Distribute the materials PRIOR to the class. Many will use the time to “get familiar” with the concepts so they can present themselves more competently in your class.

Key Point- Attendance in your class is usually an honor for the individual. They want very much to present themselves in a professional, competent way. Use your judgment to provide a respectful, face-saving environment.

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