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Orientation for a Global Population

Cross-Cultural and Global Orientation Programs

by Bob Riel and Dave Eaton

As employee populations become more diverse, one increasingly important component of orientation programs is the need to account for workers from different countries and cultural backgrounds. It may not always occur to a trainer, for example, that individuals who do not have a U.S. American cultural orientation may receive and process information differently, may be uncomfortable with our approach to trainings and group meetings, or may not understand the cultural importance of some topics that we take for granted.

These differences in values and behavior can be explained through the concept of *cultural dimensions*. For instance, some cultures tend to be more egalitarian, while others are more hierarchical; some are formal, while others are informal; some have a direct style of communication, while others are more indirect. On the next few pages, we will further explain these and other cultural dimensions and the way in which they affect people's work styles.

With that in mind, here are some things to consider in both the design and delivery of an orientation program to a culturally diverse group of employees.

Styles of Learning and Interaction – Cultural Expectations

In the United States, we tend to emphasize an interactive, participatory style of learning. The training leader is not just an instructor, but a facilitator. We design our orientations and other training programs around the expectation that there will be a give and take between the trainer and employees.

These are natural assumptions in our egalitarian culture. We expect that all individuals will be equally able to contribute to a discussion. Job title or status shouldn't prevent anyone from offering an opinion. Likewise, while we respect the position, knowledge and achievements of the trainer, we still feel at liberty to question or challenge that individual, if necessary.

Closely related to these egalitarian values is an informal culture. We have a relative lack of protocol expectations. It is acceptable to address other people, including our superiors, by their first names. We are also comfortable in approaching and talking to individuals who are several levels higher than us in the company hierarchy. These behaviors are also common in such other egalitarian cultures as Australia, Israel or Sweden.

However, people from some countries would consider this behavior unusual. In China and other Asian countries, the education system stresses rote learning, or memorization by repetition. Because of a hierarchical culture, instructors are treated with more deference and there is little or no expectation for active participation by the group, unless called upon.

These cultures also tend to have a higher degree of formality. First names are used with family or friends, less commonly with business colleagues, and never by a student to an instructor. There are also social codes that dictate behavior, depending on one's status and position. In Korea this may involve a need to bow lower when greeting a superior. But even in some Western cultures, such as France, employees do not greet their superior by a first name, nor do they have much direct contact with managers above their immediate supervisor.

When dealing with employees from a more hierarchical or formal culture, therefore, a trainer may need to take additional steps to ensure the comfort level of employees. If necessary, make it clear that you are a facilitator, not a lecturer. Emphasize the interactive or informal nature of the program. Don't assume that everyone shares the same cultural orientation, or the same expectations for how a meeting will be run.

Expectations About Individual Initiative and Participation Level

Not only do we expect participation in group or classroom activities in the United States, but we also expect that individuals will initiate their own involvement. In most training sessions, we want employees to volunteer, to be assertive, and to ask or answer questions. This extends to an individual's job performance. In many cases, we evaluate employees on their level of individual initiative. The cultural reasons for this go beyond our egalitarian values and touch upon our high regard for the individual, as well as our comfort level with risk.

In a group-oriented culture, however, individual initiative is not merely uncommon, but is often looked upon unfavorably. Japan is an example of a culture where employees work together in teams and don't usually expect individual recognition for their work. In fact, anyone who shows too much individual ambition may be regarded as a less than stellar employee. A well-known Japanese expression notes that "the nail that stands up will be pounded down." This aptly expresses the culture's preference for group effort over individual achievement.

Likewise, individuals from a low-risk culture may be hesitant about pursuing individual initiative. In these cultures, there is more of a stigma attached to failure and thus more of a fear of making mistakes. As Western companies have expanded into the former Communist states of Eastern Europe, such as Poland, they have discovered this lower comfort level with risk. This invariably means a greater sense of tentativeness from employees, who are less accustomed to taking initiative or solving problems.

When training individuals from a group culture, or those who tend to be low risk, a good strategy is to move away from a focus on individuals and to utilize more group activities.

Instead of expecting individuals to provide their own answers or opinions, a trainer might organize employees into small break-out sessions. There is more comfort in discussing a topic within a small group, and one representative of each group can then report their conclusions back to the larger gathering.

Presenting Company Policies in a Cross-Cultural Orientation

Although the presentation of company policies may seem a relatively innocuous part of employee orientations, there are instances when cultural differences should be taken into account. For instance, such programs as incentive pay or bonuses may seem odd to an employee from a group-oriented culture. If a person is not accustomed to working for individual gain, an incentive program may be less successful than we would normally expect.

This practice of shying away from incentive programs is often related to a reluctance to praise individuals. Any recognition that would set workers apart from their peers, such as an employee of the month program, could cause discomfort. In a culture such as China's, there is a strong emphasis on what is called "face." To criticize someone or point out an individual error in public would cause another person to lose face and would damage your relationship with that person. What we as Americans might not expect, however, is that to praise individuals may also cause them to lose face, for it makes them stand out from their group.

In addition, in some cultures it is common for job advancement to be based on age or status, which is the case in Asia, or on one's personal relationships and connections, which is more likely in a Latin country. In Mexico, for example, it is not uncommon for subordinates to be assigned to a new job along with their manager, in what is called the *patron* system. Individual skill is certainly not unimportant in these cultures, but it carries somewhat less weight than in the more meritocratic U.S.

These factors, of course, don't mean to suggest that company policies should be changed. But additional effort must sometimes be made to explain policies in light of U.S. business culture.

Feedback and Performance Reviews

One practice that deserves special attention is the way in which we provide feedback to employees and our tradition of formal performance reviews. Feedback is provided in many ways, not only during a formal evaluation, but also during one-on-one or group meetings, or even as a side comment during a training session. What is important to remember is that Americans have a fairly direct style of communication. We are usually honest and don't "beat around the bush." Interestingly, though, we often use a "sandwich" style of providing feedback. That is, we sandwich a critique with a compliment, which serves to soften the blow.

Compare this to the feedback styles of a few other cultures:

- The British may be a bit more direct than Americans are, but they are also more subtle. They are likely to mask a direct statement with politeness or humor so that the point gets across in a non-confrontational manner.
- The Israelis are blunt communicators. They rarely cushion a direct statement with a nicer phrase. This is not meant as an affront, but is a mere statement of the facts as they see them. The Israelis call this "dugri talk," which they see as a more realistic and sincere form of communication, stripped of the surface niceties that characterize the communication style of other cultures.
- In a country such as Thailand, on the other hand, people are more focused on the ideal of *kreng cai*, as they try to maintain group harmony by not provoking an open disagreement or criticizing another person publicly. As in most Asian cultures, feedback is given indirectly. It is often done in private and is usually subtle. Sometimes, a criticism will be delivered in the form of a suggestion or a question, because even a very subtle message will be received.

These differing cultural styles should be considered when interacting with employees during an orientation session or other training. Also, when presenting information about your company's system of performance review, remember that not all business cultures utilize formal evaluation systems as we do in the U.S.

Formal performance reviews are less common in a hierarchical or centrally-controlled culture in which there has been a tradition of lifetime employment. They may also be used less in relationship-oriented cultures. In many Arab companies, for example, not only are performance reviews less common, but so are written job descriptions. This is because less initiative is expected, while more tasks are accomplished through the daily interaction between managers and subordinates.

Discussing Sexual Harassment in a Cross-Cultural Orientation

When designing a curriculum for an employee orientation program, it may help to consider which topics are culturally based, rather than universal areas of concern.

One topic that is currently popular in U.S. companies is that of sexual harassment. This is often an expressed concern of employees who come to the U.S. from other countries, where there is less emphasis placed on the issue. Thus, the topic of sexual harassment needs to be explained more carefully to non-U.S. employees. They need to understand not only the rules of workplace behavior, but also the reasons that this is important in American companies.

These reasons would include the fact that the U.S. has an egalitarian culture that believes males and females should have equal rights, opportunities and choices. In addition, we have a "low context" culture, meaning we tend to have extensive verbal exchanges and to explain and write

down our concepts of right and wrong. This leads to a strong emphasis on legal issues. Finally, some cultures are simply more male-dominant and are more accustomed to comments or behavior that would be unacceptable in a U.S. environment.

Orientation Schedules and Time Management

Another popular topic at training sessions in the U.S. is time management. American culture has a monochronic orientation to time, which means that we break our day into organized segments, accomplish tasks one at a time, and appreciate precise schedules. This is also common in countries such as Great Britain, Germany and Denmark.

However, the whole issue of time management means a lot less to someone from Brazil or Turkey. In these and similar cultures, there is a polychronic orientation towards time, so that schedules and agendas are less regimented, individuals don't feel a need to be prompt, and interruptions are taken in stride. These cultures tend to be strongly relationship-oriented, so that time is seen as more relative. Whomever you are with at the moment is considered more important than what may be on the schedule for the next hour or day.

In Conclusion

These are some of the more obvious challenges faced when putting together an orientation program for a diverse employee population, although a variety of other topics could be similarly considered. None of this requires wholesale changes in orientation programs. But it does require trainers, managers and human resource professionals to be aware of these cultural differences. Small adjustments in design and delivery can go a long way towards ensuring that goals and outcomes are met for all employees, regardless of national or cultural background.

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