

# Training for cultural competence

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to examine the best ways for an organization to instil cultural intelligence and international success in to its workforce.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Possible methods examined include highly tailored cross-cultural curricula, virtual training, global leadership programs, international team building exercises, and knowledge management systems. The recommendation and analysis of these methods is based on 25 years of Global Dynamics experience in training executives in cross-cultural skills.*

**Findings** – *The author's research has found that complete implementation of the recommended methods result in optimal performance in a global market. Making employees aware of their own cultural perspectives and misunderstandings enables the development of a larger world view. Leadership involvement in the direction of organization's cultural competence strategy helps employees hone their skills on specific points of emphasis. Additionally, metrics should be used to gauge the effectiveness of the cultural intelligence strategy in order to continually improve elements of the overarching program.*

**Practical implications** – *By having more direct involvement in the learning process, leadership can strengthen the organization's cultural intelligence and ensure that the learnings are directly applicable.*

**Originality/value** – *This paper is based on more than 25 years of experience working with the world's leading international organizations to enhance their global performance.*

**Keywords** *Learning organizations, Team building, Competences, National cultures, Cross-cultural management, Cultural competence, Cross-cultural training, International team building, Cultural intelligence*

**Paper type** *General review*

For years, the Chinese branch of a major European-based multinational pharmaceutical company saved significant money by submitting its proposals for the approval of new medicines in English to the Chinese government, even though the “rule” stated the application should be in Chinese. To write the application in Chinese would be very expensive (requiring new computers, keyboards, software, etc). After some time, the company changed one of its top people in China (who had established excellent relationships with Chinese government officials) without informing or consulting with the Chinese authorities. The Chinese were offended, and mandated that the company now submit all documents in Chinese (at great expense and lost time). If the company had the cultural intelligence (CQ) to understand the importance of long-standing relationships in the Chinese culture, they undoubtedly would have taken the time to overlap the new and current executives and so that the current executive could make a formal introduction of his replacement. This is just one example of the ways that companies lose money every day by not understanding the cultures with which they are working.

Having cultural intelligence (CQ) means acquiring cultural awareness of self and others; recognizing ethnocentrism; understanding the consequences of cultural assumptions; and learning ways to promote effective working relations, styles of doing business around the world, cultural differences in communication styles, and the impact of virtual communications on intercultural understanding. It also means understanding the “known”

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key cultural tendencies, such as decision making and communication styles, that repeatedly cause misunderstanding and mistrust.

Learning how to properly and effectively interact with people from other cultures is a delicate art which requires more than just reading facts on a country's demographics. Ignorance of the issues and practices of a culture could lead to mistakes that could cost a company valuable business. Making employees aware of cultural intelligence shortcomings they may not have even realized they had, can help them learn how to correct their cultural misconceptions and avoid potential errors. Creating self-awareness (helping employees discover what they do not know) is where training can have the greatest impact on a company, so training departments should develop comprehensive programs targeted towards eliminating these gaps in understanding.

Cultural competence requires more than knowledge of other cultures or the skills needed for cross-cultural interactions. A significant part of the equation is awareness of one's own worldview. In order to achieve this, what is first needed is the ability to develop and adapt a global mindset. This means being aware of the nuances required for doing business in targeted cultures, where communication styles differ and assumptions about these styles can have a negative impact on business. From the perspective of a trainer, a course on conducting business with people from other cultures should include cultural awareness of both oneself and others, and the consequences of ethnocentrism and cultural assumptions. These subjects would complement the traditional components of cross-cultural aspects of management training courses (such as the various styles and context differences) quite nicely.

Training and development departments should develop a cross-cultural competence curriculum made up of courses that focus on cultural intelligence; country-specific training; international team building; global leadership; multicultural sales, marketing and branding; negotiating across borders; effective virtual relationships; and other topics of importance to the organization.

We discuss some of these programs below.

### **Virtual communications**

Cultural competence extends to an understanding of virtual communications (or working with a geographically dispersed team), which can be even more confused than working across cultures in the same physical space. Employees should be made to understand what kind of impact the rise of virtual communications in the workplace has had on intercultural interactions and how there are still improvements that need to be made on that front.

The instantaneous way businesses communicate in the modern era, through social media, emails and chat rooms, means there is more room for error and misunderstanding. Among some of the concerns that exist for cross-cultural virtual training are time differences and differences in learning styles, where questioning the teacher or singling out an individual can be seen as disrespectful or embarrassing.

### **International team building**

International team building is a key topic for cultural competence training, as it touches upon many of the recurring themes already listed. Above all, the differences in matters such as

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negotiation styles and how to communicate with one another in terms of criticism need to be weighed carefully by team members to minimize potential misunderstandings. International teams also struggle with differing perceptions of decision-making, roles, leadership, accountability, and reaching agreement. These misunderstandings could risk undermining the team’s effectiveness, but considerations in both intercultural teamwork and virtual training can help the team operate to its maximum potential.

### **Global leadership development**

Training for cultural competence can be integrated seamlessly with training programs and courses tailored towards training global leaders. An employee who possesses strong global leadership will have a great deal of cultural intelligence and teamwork skills, in addition to being a strong leader. These are qualities that can be taught, and with proper training and experience, top performers may be made into valuable leaders in time.

Company-tailored courses on global leadership can help provide emphases on the skills that are most relevant to the company, as opposed to university courses, which are sometimes too generic. Global team projects and international assignments are good ways to provide them with experience, but the company’s training and development department must be proactive in guiding the employee and making sure they focus on the most valuable information to be learned from such assignments.

### **Realizing the return on investment**

Corporations may initially be reluctant to invest in a cross-cultural training course for their employees simply because the benefit may not be obvious. If the curriculum of the proposed course is too disconnected from class to class or program to program, then the overall effectiveness of the curriculum will be undermined. Similarly, if the course does not establish a clear link between cross-cultural competence and business performance, it may be harder for employees to believe that such a link exists for themselves. In order to avoid these, the curriculum should strive to attain a few key attributes:

- Training programs should ideally have a clear structure, focusing on specific goals such as teaching employees specific cross-cultural skills over time to increase their abilities and offering coaching to high-potential employees.
- There should also be a high level of interconnectivity and continuity between classes in a curriculum, so as to ensure that there is a link and a purpose to graduating from one course to the next.
- The information from courses should also be extremely accessible, perhaps with the use of knowledge management systems, which are covered more in-depth later in this article, or other media types such through the web.
- Although courses should focus on specific subjects or areas of knowledge, they should be able to be customized to fit the needs of each specific group that takes the course, and there should be a post-course evaluation available to measure the ability of the course to meet these groups’ needs.

## The importance of feedback

Feedback for the curriculum should work on multiple levels. First, pre- and post-program evaluations can determine exactly what kind of benefit a program can have for its employees. Second, the reality for these programs is that a single seminar will not teach effective cultural competence; it will take a series of seminars along with additional projects and interventions for reinforcement. The combined teachings of the entire program should be based around a common goal, and each employee's personal goals and achievements should be measured to offer another metric for performance and behavioral change.

The last level of feedback, and the one companies will probably care about the most, is analyzing the return on investment and changes in revenue as a result of the new curriculums. Though this can be difficult to measure and link conclusively to changes in behavior as a result of cultural-competence training, it is possible through the use of metrics, allowing an analysis of communication and decision-making before and after training, as well as an analysis of the proper financials and statistics on product development.

## Retaining the knowledge

A strong knowledge management system will also greatly assist in the process of strengthening a company's ability to improve its cultural competence. By having a central database available filled with information with employee information and experiences ready for access, all employees can develop their knowledge and build their internal networks based on shared experiences with other employees and the need to consult another employee for potential questions on a certain region. Such a system would also have information on further opportunities and training programs to allow employees even more potential information and help strengthen their cross-cultural abilities.

## Endnote

Dr. Neal Goodman is the president of Global Dynamics Inc. ([www.global-dynamics.com](http://www.global-dynamics.com)), the leading provider of cross-cultural training services. He can be reached at +1.305.682.7883 or [ngoodman@global-dynamics.com](mailto:ngoodman@global-dynamics.com). As a special courtesy to the readers of this article, upon request, Dr Goodman will send a copy of the 14 core cultural tendencies that have been found to make a difference.

## About the author

Dr Neal Goodman is the Co-founder and President of Global Dynamics, Inc. and is an internationally recognized authority in international human resource management and organizational development. Through the auspices of Global Dynamics Dr Goodman designs international training programs for the corporate training departments of multinational corporations and international organizations. These programs have helped thousands of corporate executives to be more effective in international settings. Dr Goodman's programs on team building, international joint ventures and diversity in the workplace have been recognized by corporations, government agencies and educational institutions. Dr Goodman has authored numerous books and articles on the globalization of organizations. His publications include: "Cross-cultural training for the global executive and intercultural education at the university level", in *Improving Intercultural Interactions: Models for Cross-cultural Training Programs* by Richard W. Brislin and Tomoko Yoshida (Sage Publications, 1994). Neal Goodman can be contacted at: [ngoodman@global-dynamics.com](mailto:ngoodman@global-dynamics.com)

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