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Cross-cultural training programs and expatriate adjustment effectiveness

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Abstract. The purpose of the study reported here was to explore cross-cultural training programs and expatriate adjustment effectiveness that increase effective cross-cultural interaction. Effective cross-cultural training increases trainees' knowledge, encourages them to see the personal and organizational benefits of cultural diversity and cross-cultural competence, and increases their skill and capacity to work with cultural diversity. Cross-cultural training is an effective strategy in the achievement of organizational performance targets and multicultural policy objectives. Addressing the identified limitations of current practice in CCT will increase its contribution to the development and enhancement of organizational and individual cultural competence. Moreover, developing cross-cultural training programs could add value to the firm and its people.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Competence, Cross-Cultural Training, Expatriate Adjustment, Multinational Corporations

1 Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) are having difficulty retaining expatriates for their global operations. It is estimated that 10–80% of expatriates sent on foreign assignments return home prematurely. One of the reasons for expatriates' failure has been cited as the inability of these managers and/or their spouses to adapt to the host-country's culture. As a result, cross-culture training programs provided to employees and their families by MNCs have become crucially important for successful international operations (Okpara & Kabongo, 2011).

Gertsen (1990) argues that cross-cultural training can be classified into two major categories: (1) conventional training, where the information is transmitted through a unidirectional communication, as is the case in colleges, universities and management development centers and (2) experimental training, where the trainer gets the trainees to participate by simulating real life and hands on situations. Gertsen (1990) also identified two other possible training orientations where the training emphasis is based on the notion of culture in general and aims at sensitizing participants to the notion of culture, or focuses on one specific culture and aims at making trainees more competent in that particular culture. Gertsen (1990) argued that the combination of

these two dimensions reveals four types of training (Okpara & Kabongo, 2011), as shown in Figure 1.

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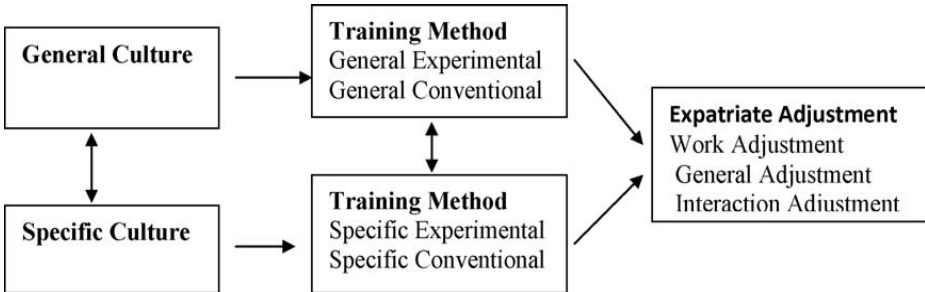


Fig. 1. Dimensions of cross-cultural training methods.
(Source: Adapted and modified from Gertsen (1990, p. 354).)

2 Definition and contents

2.1 Cross-Cultural Competence

The range of definitions of cross-cultural competence could be synthesized as: The ability to function or work effectively in culturally diverse situations in general and in particular encounters with people from different cultures. Because of the hidden or invisible nature of one's own culture and the historically tribal, territorial and parochial nature of nations and societies, cross-cultural competence is not an innate characteristic of human nature. Rather, it is learned — as is culture — through experience, education and training. Individuals and organizations do not choose their native culture, but they can choose to acquire and place value on cross-cultural competence. The level or degree of cultural competence required for effective functioning is determined largely by context. It is also largely dictated and measured by the perceptions of the individuals in cross-cultural encounters; one person's idea of the cultural competence required in the situation may be different from another's (Bean, 2006).

Australian papers and reports (Miralles & Migliorino, 2005; Eisenbruch, 2004) have proposed a model comprising the following four dimensions of cultural competence (Bean, 2006):

(a) Systemic cultural competence — requires effective policies and procedures, monitoring mechanisms and sufficient resources to foster culturally competent behavior and practice at all levels.

(b) Organizational cultural competence — requires skills and resources to meet client diversity, an organizational culture which values, supports and evaluates cultural competency as integral to core business.

(c) Professional cultural competence — depends on education and professional

development and requires cultural competence standards to guide the working lives of individuals.

(d) Individual cultural competence — requires the maximization of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors within an organization that supports individuals to work with diverse colleagues and customers.

2.2 Cross-Cultural Training (CCT)

CCT is defined as that which increases the competence of individuals to function in cross cultural situations domestically and abroad. In broad terms, CCT programs focus on the following broad categories (Bean, 2006):

- (a) managing and working with culturally-diverse employees and colleagues;
- (b) working and living internationally;
- (c) designing and delivering products and services to culturally-diverse customers.

CCT is generally delivered in three models (Bean, 2006);

(a) General awareness and communication training — focuses on developing generic cross cultural skills and sensitivity to assist with interactions in any culture the participant may encounter.

(b) Ethno- or country-specific training — focuses on a single ethnic group or country to increase participants' knowledge, understanding and ability to function effectively in that environment or with that group.

(c) Training in working with interpreters and translators — focuses on developing the technical skills involved and also includes those elements of cross-cultural communication that influence the process.

Pre-departure training is the traditional form for CCT and it is conducted apart from the actual experience of realities in the host culture. Traditionally, pre-departure CCT programs are administered about a month before departure. Such post-arrival training need not necessarily take place immediately upon the expatriate's arrival; some CCT may be more effective if it is delayed until the expatriate tries to cope with culture shock. Hence, such training could start about three to six months after arrival in the host country. Expatriate CCT aims to increase the applicability of new behaviors, which are more appropriate to the host culture. However, an individual's capacity for efficient learning ebbs and flows during the expatriate period. Therefore, CCT may preferably be sequential, progressing in steps starting at pre-departure and continuing to the post-arrival phases. Sequential CCT would provide continuous guidance for the incremental restructuring of the expatriate's frame of reference towards greater consistency with the host culture (Selmer, 2010).

Through observation, interview, and material analysis, it looks at five essential and practical considerations in cross-cultural program adjustment – spoken communication, material translation, silent communication, local trainers, and empowerment and localization (Chang, 2009). Furthermore, cultural adjustment is considered to be a prerequisite for expatriate success abroad. One way to enhance adjustment is to provide employees with knowledge and awareness of appropriate norms and behaviors of the host country through cross-cultural training (Puck, Kittler, & Wright, 2008).

3 Implementation steps

The steps of implementing cross-cultural training programs, as follows (Bean, 2006):

Step 1: Define the organizational context and training objectives

Establish the relationship of cultural competence to the organizational, legal and people management contexts. Define the training needs and objectives. Ensure strong organizational support for the training program.

Step 2: Understand cultural competence and cross-cultural training

Before embarking on a cross-cultural training program, be clear on the nature of cultural competence, the range of cross-cultural training approaches and the criteria for an effective cross-cultural training trainer.

Step 3: Promote the value of cross-cultural training to the organization

Demonstrate the value of cross-cultural training to all stakeholders with the statistical evidence and qualitative comments.

Step 4: Design and conduct cross-cultural training effectively

Study the range of options for cross-cultural training and resources that will ensure the training objectives are met. Select the appropriate trainers and work closely with them. Organize and conduct the program for maximum effectiveness.

Step 5: Evaluate and follow-up the cross-cultural training program

Design and carry out a rigorous evaluation process. Identify and implement strategies to ensure that learning is applied to performance and enhancing the organization's cultural competence.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Effective cross-cultural training increases trainees' knowledge, encourages them to see the personal and organizational benefits of cultural diversity and cross-cultural competence, and increases their skill and capacity to work with cultural diversity. A recent review of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003) suggests that a higher degree of acceptance/adaptation to cultural differences among employees would result in the following benefits (Bean, 2006):

- (a) Less stress.
- (b) More satisfaction with living/working in a foreign culture.
- (c) Greater job accomplishment in culturally-diverse environments.
- (d) Lower levels of prejudice and discrimination.
- (e) Less resistance to diversity initiatives.

At the systemic and organizational levels, cultural competence must be closely linked to policy requirements and organizational values and service delivery objectives and expressed in high levels of political, leadership and managerial support for CCT. At the professional level, cultural competence must be integrated into the standards and

competency and performance frameworks of professions and occupations. At the individual level, CCT is most effective when it addresses the concerns and motivations of participants and is provided within an organizational context that provides opportunities and incentives for applying acquired cross-cultural knowledge and skills to the workplace. To effectively facilitate the development of cultural competence, cross-cultural trainers need support in the areas of professional and resource development. Cross-cultural training is an effective strategy in the achievement of organizational performance targets and multicultural policy objectives. Addressing the identified limitations of current practice in CCT will increase its contribution to the development and enhancement of organizational and individual cultural competence (Bean, 2006). Moreover, developing cross-cultural training programs could add value to the firm and its people (Qin & Baruch, 2010).

Since expatriate training is essential, how to design effective training programs is an important issue for business managers. It suggests that an effective training program is contingent upon certain environmental factors. Among these factors, the fit between expatriate learning style and instructor learning mode, and the perceived cross cultural differences between host country and home country were regarded as the two main moderating (or contingency) factors to evaluate the influences of expatriate training on training effectiveness(Lee & Li, 2008).

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