Today's global workforce makes it more important than ever for employees to understand subtle cultural nuances.

Raju Chebium 1/7/2015

Permissions

After receiving a positive performance review, Sabine, a Frenchwoman on a two-year assignment in Chicago, thought work was going well—so much so that she wanted to extend her stay in the States.

Meanwhile, her boss Jake had a very different impression. He thought Sabine wasn't working out at all. Although she had boundless energy and enthusiasm, her work was often sloppy. He had talked to her about it, but she seemed oblivious. Unless her performance improved, he would have to let her go.

How could two people have such vastly divergent perspectives on the same situation? In this case, it comes down to cross-cultural miscommunication, according to Erin Meyer, a professor at the French business school INSEAD and author of *The Culture Map* (PublicAffairs, 2014), a book about effective business communications in a multicultural world.

The anecdote, drawn from Meyer's book, shows how cultural miscues impede effective workplace communications. These miscues can also undermine relationships between companies and customers spread out around the world.

Sabine and her manager might have understood each other better if they'd known more about the cultural issues at play. American managers often accentuate the positives and minimize the negatives, couching their criticism in encouraging language to soften the blow. By contrast, French managers tend to gloss over the positives and provide direct, blunt feedback.

The demand for effective training programs in cross-cultural communications and sensitivity has exploded in recent years, driven by the desire to prevent such misunderstandings and to boost corporate competitiveness in the global marketplace. Unfortunately, there's no consensus on what makes such training effective, although experts agree on two general points:

- The commitment to improving internal and external cross-cultural communications must become part of the company's culture and apply to everyone equally, from the CEO down.
- Many existing programs offer little more than etiquette training—such as whether you should bow or shake hands—while failing to address deeper issues that impact communications.

Boeing: A Mixed Approach

At Boeing, the world's largest aerospace company with 330,000 employees in 28 countries, leaders use internal and external trainers, and a mix of approaches and tools—from online modules to afternoon seminars to one-on-one training—to help staff become more culturally aware.

All employees are trained using GlobeSmart, an online resource developed by Portland-based Aperian Global. Workers and their families embarking on overseas assignments are given one-on-one sensitivity training and cultural orientation sessions.

The goal is to make sure employees are "not just landing in a country and getting introduced for the first time," says Lisa-Marie Gustafson, SPHR, a talent manager for Boeing's supplier management group.

The company also arranges "lunch and learn" cultural talks, employee rotation programs to allow overseas staff to work for nine to 18 months in the U.S., and diversity summits twice a year in U.S. locations. Boeing's leaders can also take the "passport series" of training sessions, which are structured and classroom-based.

"The vast majority of training in corporations around the world is about cultural differences. If companies do anything, they sensitize people in a quick-and-dirty fashion: Indians do X; Americans do Y," says Andrew Molinsky, an associate professor of organizational behavior at Brandeis University's international business school.

But that doesn't address how to remedy the issues that arise from culture clashes. "The core challenge is how to adapt and adjust their behavior in light of their differences—and that

entails learning to act outside your cultural comfort zone," Molinsky says. "I don't discount the work that's being done. But it's only a starting point."

What's Effective?

A good training program addresses invisible and subtle differences between people of different cultures. "How is trust built differently in this culture? What is the most constructive way to provide criticism? These things vary greatly from country to country," Meyer says. "These are the differences that impact a workplace the most, because even employees who work frequently with international colleagues may be totally unaware of them."

Japanese, Indian and German companies have been providing cultural sensitivity training or sending their employees to learn Western business practices for decades. But U.S. companies are relatively new to doing this.

Lisa-Marie Gustafson, SPHR, a talent manager for Boeing Corp.'s supplier management group, says it wasn't until about 10 years ago that many U.S. firms began offering programs aimed at improving workplace communications between different cultural groups.

Smruti Patel, a leadership coach and founder of the leadership consulting firm Nexus Vision LLC, which has offices in the U.S., U.K. and Kenya, says human resource managers who wish to offer cultural sensitivity programs face another huge obstacle: employee indifference.

"The danger … is employees rolling their eyes and thinking, 'Oh my God, not another training program.' That's why training needs to be more strategic," she says.

According to Patel, companies would be better off providing intensive, one-on-one coaching to managers who are being groomed for overseas assignments within multinational teams.

SAP: One Size Doesn't Fit All

SAP is a software giant based in Walldorf, Germany, with locations in 130 countries. It has an elaborate diversity program, which includes cultural sensitivity training. Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer Anka Wittenberg, who leads the company's efforts in this area, says 89 nationalities are represented among the headquarters staff alone.

Her office connects new employees with existing employee networks. The 30 networks include a Latino group, a female business network and a group for parents of children with disabilities.

"These grassroots institutions reflect employee energy," Wittenberg says.

Employees embarking on overseas business trips can access online cultural briefings. All SAP employees can take classroom-based training and receive interactive instruction. The company uses a mix of internal and external trainers and customizes its training depending on the location destination and employees' needs.

These efforts have the leadership's full backing. In fact, the company's executive board (the board of directors, in American lingo) reflects SAP's diversity, with members from India, the United States and Denmark.

The key is to boost their cultural "awareness"—in other words, to teach them skills that transcend mere etiquette, according to Patel, a Kenyan native of Asian-Indian descent who works out of Nairobi, London and Washington, D.C.

Properly trained employees will know:

- When to adopt a "transactional," or businesslike, approach, and when to cultivate relationships with overseas clients.
- How to read the mood of a room.
- How to pick up on what foreign staffers really mean despite what they publicly express.
- How to correctly interpret body language and other nonverbal cues when dealing with clients of differing nationalities.

Working Through Discomfort

Molinsky says imparting cultural awareness is only half the battle.

The best training programs should also teach employees how to act in cultural situations that make them uncomfortable. That is, training would ideally teach employees "global dexterity"—which is also the title of [Molinsky's recent book](#).

Iberdrola USA: A Work in Progress

The cultural sensitivity program at Iberdrola USA is evolving. The company, which has 5,000 employees in the U.S., focuses on electricity transmission and generation.

The program was launched in 2009—a year after Energy East became a wholly owned subsidiary of Spanish energy giant Iberdrola. Training efforts are focused primarily on ensuring internal harmony within the international workforce.

The company sends Americans to work at locations in Mexico, Scotland, Brazil, and Britain and other EU countries, and it brings overseas employees—particularly those from Spain—to work in the U.S. for two- or three-year stints.

Sheri Lamoureux, Iberdrola USA's vice president of human resources, says the company contracts with outside trainers who teach employees the basics of linguistic differences and preferences for personal space, among other things.

The training costs $1,500 to $3,000 a day, she says. The company also pays for high-level coaching for executives.

A company-sponsored exchange program, in which the children of overseas employees temporarily stay with U.S. employees and vice versa, has become a hit, Lamoureux says, adding that anecdotal feedback has been positive.

"It's not just a one-time training class," she notes of Iberdrola's approach to cultural awareness issues. "It's something that's built upon."

The professor is testing a program to do just that. Last fall, a second cohort of Brandeis MBA students underwent the training, in which students engage in focused role-playing over several weeks.

Under Molinsky's watchful eye, a student from Asia who may be culturally programmed to remain quiet unless she's asked to speak, would practice speaking out at meetings without being prompted. Or an American who's uncomfortable giving blunt feedback could practice that skill. Molinsky says the idea is for students to be put in realistic situations and to benefit from feedback and analysis in a supportive environment.

Experts say globalization has greatly narrowed the commercial gap between nations, but it hasn't lessened the cultural gap as much. Therefore, paying attention to behavioral nuances is not just a matter of cultural nicety; it's a business necessity.

Corporate demand for cultural sensitivity training is increasing because globalization has created new and unexpected overseas markets, says Neal Goodman, president of Global Dynamics Inc. a consulting firm that has delivered training for 30 years to clients such as Hyundai, AT&T, Siemens AG and the World Bank.

"We all judge everybody by our own cultural lens. We have nothing else but our own cultural lens," he says. "Unless we get proper cultural training, we're unable to see the same situation from multiple perspectives simultaneously."

One of Goodman's clients, a pharmaceutical multinational, did substantial business in China because of the good relationships that the company's representative had patiently built with Chinese government officials.

But leaders back at headquarters didn't understand the importance of those connections to success in the Chinese market. They recalled the China manager and, after leaving the post vacant for three months, sent a replacement. By then it was too late. The relationships had been severed, and the company lost $1 million worth of business to a competitor, Goodman says.

The culturally savvy thing to do would have been to send the replacement to China three months prior to recalling the China manager. That would have given the new person time to establish ties with the Chinese government and ensure business continuity, Goodman says.

Before choosing or designing a cross-cultural training program, HR managers must thoroughly assess the workforce and its needs. The best way to do that is to embrace a process that guarantees confidentiality and anonymity to employees who provide input, according to Claretha Hughes, a management professor at the University of Arkansas who has worked in corporate HR and sensitivity training for 19 years.

Hughes suggests deploying teams of interviewers to various company locations to conduct structured, one-on-one talks with randomly selected employees about cultural issues of concern to them. The same teams should then talk to staff at corporate headquarters and provide oral and written reports about areas of strength and opportunity in terms of the company's cultural effectiveness within days of finishing the interviews.

Bringing It In-House

Despite the growing demand for cultural sensitivity training, not everyone is sold. Steve Paskoff, founder and CEO of Atlanta-based ELI Inc., says the programs could land companies in legal trouble because they risk stereotyping employees.

What companies should do instead is develop policies aimed at promoting a standard corporate culture, says Paskoff, a former U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission trial attorney. They need to define what constitutes appropriate workplace behavior and reinforce that code of conduct in every location.

Another option is to take a more homegrown internal approach to building cultural awareness. According to Hughes, "the advantage of internal approaches … is that there is familiarity with the organization and an opportunity to build on current relationships. However, if there is not a genuine, open culture with regard to the problems an organization has, then it is better to use an external approach."

At some organizations, HR or other leaders ask staff from different nations of origin or cultural backgrounds to share critical cultural information with other employees, perhaps in the form of a presentation at an all-staff meeting or a luncheon event. At others, employees might take part in a potluck or international food festival geared toward the sharing of cultural traditions.

At the American Psychiatric Association last summer, employees took part in the association's first diversity scavenger hunt, in which different teams answered trivia questions related to people from various cultural backgrounds as well as the association's history. Then they visited the offices of employees who were associated with the answers to find items for the hunt.

At a minimum, company leaders should commit to treating every employee, customer and client with respect and should define what that means—using no racial terms, jokes or language, even if such conduct is legally permissible in a particular country.

Finally, think in terms of common sense and common courtesy, treating others the way you would want to be treated. Sometimes, creating cultural sensitivity is no more complicated than learning the correct pronunciation of someone's name.

"It is a monument to the insensitivity of Americans that many Asians feel compelled to make up American versions of their first names, rather than expecting others to take the time to learn and pronounce their given names," says Thomas Kolditz, a professor at the Yale School of Management.

Circulating calendars that list holidays around the world—when important stakeholders in other countries likely won't be reachable—or adopting universal time or date conventions are good strategies for companies with substantial global penetration.

The Best Approach?

Most programs offered today focus on "cultural congruence," or the assimilation of workers from a variety of cultures into a common corporate culture. But to be truly effective, Kolditz says, programs should also teach "cultural differentiation," or how to maintain one's own culture while recognizing the value that other cultures bring to the company.

Combining the two types of training may be the best way to produce a workforce that will succeed anywhere in the world.

Raju Chebium is a freelance writer in Maryland.

Web Extras

SHRM article: Navigate Cultural Differences to Succeed Across Borders

SHRM article: Global Training Sought for Leaders of Multicultural Teams

SHRM toolkit: Understanding Workplace Cultures Globally

SHRM research: Global Diversity and Inclusion