

Exercise Topic 4.3:

Recognizing ineffective responses to cultural differences

- by Culturewise Ltd.

Key objectives:

- To develop learners' ability to recognize ineffective individual responses to cross-cultural interactions
- To provide learners with a handy summary of how not to respond to cultural differences on overseas assignments

Timeframe: 40 minutes

Materials: 'Recognizing Individual Responses to Culture' handout

Background rationale:

In this activity, learners are asked to identify and classify some common individual responses to working across cultural barriers that are each, in one way or other, unproductive.

Procedure:

1. Provide the learner with a copy of the 'Recognizing Individual Responses to Culture' handout.
2. Allow the learner to read the summaries, and then classify each quote.
3. Ask the learner to rephrase one or two of the quotes in ways that they feel would reflect a more productive and less ethnocentric view of the world.

Observations and suggestions for discussion:

Feedback can usefully explore what each quote indicates about the attitudes of the individuals concerned, and whether more productive ways of thinking might exist.

The quotes are all adapted from real-life comments. Learners may question whether these really are evidence of ineffective ways of dealing with cultural differences. They may even agree with some of the quotes. Debating these beliefs is a useful source of learning.

Below is a suggested classification of the quotes shown:

- a. Neo-native.
- b. Expat. This American manager was replaced soon afterwards by a British executive who had been headhunted locally.
- c. Global villager. This particular individual had an extraordinarily strong personality and very definite ideas. He achieved great success in selling to the Chinese and, to this day, remains dismissive of culture. One wonders what his Chinese counterparts made of him.
- d. Global villager. The organization may well look for the same type of people to work within a strong organizational and professional culture. This does not mean that, faced with ambiguity and difficulties, these individuals will not revert to the default values and behaviors present in their national cultures.
- e. Missionary. Such a total lack of cultural empathy or insight indicates someone at the missionary stage.
- f. Global villager. Although, on the surface, this might indicate a positive ethno-relative worldview, there is no suggestion that what each member of the organization brings with them from their cultural background is a potential source of strength and learning for the organization as a whole.
- g. Missionary/expat. Elements of two responses are visible here. Greater self-awareness and understanding of why things are the way they are would help in this situation, as would a determination to find positive aspects in the local culture.

Subsequent discussion can explore situations in which the learners themselves have demonstrated similar perceptions as the individuals quoted.

Recognizing Ineffective Responses to Cultural Differences – Handout

Read carefully through the following categorizations.

Missionaries

Missionaries exhibit denial. They simply cannot conceive that others can operate successfully on a completely different value system, or that other ways of doing things have merit and logic. When missionaries see people doing things differently, they do not see the influence of culture. Instead, they make rapid judgements about the individuals concerned, or draw on out-of-date and prescriptive stereotypes. These judgements, based on the missionaries' own conception about how things 'should' be, often classify other people as backward, unsophisticated or uneducated. The missionary sees their role as educating others in the 'right' way to do things.

Expats

Expats exhibit defence. They recognize that there are, indeed, other ways of doing things, but in general judge them to be vastly inferior to 'our ways of doing things' back home. They recognize the existence of another set of values and behaviors but continue to make faulty attributions or interpretations from their own ethnocentric perceptions, often with negative judgements attached. In the expats' world, there is limited space for shades of grey and precious little empathy with other cultures. Expats often keep contact with people from other cultures at a minimum.

Neo-natives

Neo-natives also exhibit defence. However, in an opposite response to expats, they begin to assume that everything about the new culture is good and nothing bad. They sometimes see the new culture as more spiritual, or in some ill-defined way 'better' than their own. They can even stereotype or deride their own cultural background as inferior. For neo-natives almost everything is black and white, and they have little time for their own compatriots. Neo-natives see it as their role to become experts in their new culture, to become 'more French than the French'.

Global villagers

Global villagers exhibit minimization. They admit to a minimal number of differences between cultures, but only at a superficial behavioural level. They consider that 'underneath, everyone is the same' and are unsympathetic to the idea of deeper differences in assumptions and values. They believe that what works here will, with perhaps some simple superficial modifications, work everywhere else. In the global villagers' world, differences are side-lined or ignored. Instead, global villagers see it as their role to identify similarities. They may even disparage those who seek to acknowledge cultural variation as being bigoted or prejudiced.

Now, read each of the quotes below, which have all been adapted from quotes made by people who have attended cross-cultural learning or consulting events. Decide which of the categorizations above (if any) is applicable to each.

- a. "Since I came to live in Thailand, I have realized just how shallow and meaningless life in Europe is. The stress and anxiety that everybody suffers ... and for what? I'll never go back." (Irish doctor on assignment in Thailand)
- b. "I just can't believe how lazy the British are. Unmotivated, unenthusiastic and disinterested. Now I just do not employ any at all, full stop. We only have Australians or New Zealanders working in the London office." (US manager of the London subsidiary of a New York-based architecture firm)
- c. "I can't tell you how many stupid things people say about business in China, all this rubbish about Guanxi. * It is just garbage. The Chinese are the same as everyone else. If you have the right business model, the right technology and properly incentivize your staff, you will win business. Full stop." (Scottish CEO of manufacturing exporter) *System of networking and mutual favours said to underpin business relationships in China.
- d. "Working for a music business our people are much the same all over the world. In fact, we look for the same type of people when recruiting. As a result, cultural differences don't come into the equation." (French HR manager)
- e. "Although the older Poles are difficult to deal with, the younger people we employ have just as clear an idea of the importance of meeting deadlines and getting things done on time as people in the US." (American production director in Polish car components manufacturer)
- f. "We really have such a strong belief in ourselves in this organization, an awareness that we are really unique and different, that where we come from as individuals is irrelevant. We drop our nationality and become 'one of us'." (Brazilian employee in a worldwide charity)

- g.** “There is really almost nothing in this country that works properly. I know it is wrong, but I can't help comparing everything here with the situation at home. It frustrates me because the people themselves don't seem to understand how much better things could be if they put their minds to it.” (Western European voluntary worker in Africa)