

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

Cross-cultural Training Realities.
(Who cares? I'll learn about culture when I get there.)

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For the Kazakhstan Monitor

While teaching as an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University I taught a number of courses in the MBA programme. Two of the courses were managerial communication and cross-cultural management. The cross-cultural management courses were always composed of very diverse groups. Each term there were students from around the world as well as the States. While teaching one of my sections an American student (a middle-level manager) was giving his final report for the class and said something that amazed all the international students present and myself. I asked him the length of time he would recommend for instituting a pre-departure cross-culture training programme. He stated with confidence, "about four hours". Seeing the reaction of his audience he very arrogantly added, "You cannot ask an American manager to sit for more than four hours because they do not have time. It is wholly unrealistic! There are more important things to do while getting prepared for an overseas posting!"

Ladies and Gentleman, if you feel that the position of my student was correct then I must point out that your capability to succeed in an overseas environment is limited, at best. It seems that people from the States in particular tend to like training short and dirty, right to the point. This is endemic to the U.S. culture where efficiency and time management have top priority. Yet, in terms of cross-cultural training it is counter productive. There are two major deficiencies with both cross-cultural training currently offered and subsequent levels of international business success:

1) There is a continuous high rate of expatriate failure, and the quality, depth and length of training they received is indicated as the central issue.

2) Conventional wisdom in descriptive and prescriptive research indicates that training methodologies maintain a narrow focus (i.e. country specific training with more language training for the person assigned overseas is required **and** it is in itself adequate). Long-term multidimensional training that investigates cultural norms and values prior to departure is not a priority in the United States.

Estimates of the U.S. expatriate failure rates are consistent through the literature produced by professionals in my field, and not surprising. From 25 - 40% of U.S. based expatriates are not completing their assignments overseas while in developed countries. (Ashamalla and Crocitto 1997) When compared with their colleagues in Europe the rates have been significantly lower, up to four times lower. (Ashamalla and Crocitto 1997) The failure rate in developing countries for Americans is estimated at 70% (Shay and Tracey 1997).

Some of you may well say that the information above is dated. You may point out that things surely have changed and that some advancement in best practices has been made. Looking at many "current" articles, my colleagues are still referencing studies and research done in the 1980s and 1990s. However here is a more recent section from an article published in 2000 for your consideration -

"The high cost of expatriate failure was outlined by Laura Herring of **The IMPACT Group** at a recent London conference. Unofficial estimates of overseas assignment failure rates are 30 – 40%, with frequently-cited reasons being insufficient preparation of the assigned executive and family members, lack of family support, little or no support for the career-oriented spouse, and expat career anxieties, such as lack of return guarantees and active mentoring systems. An overwhelming majority of expatriate executives, 89%, are accompanied by a spouse or partner, but the relocation reality is that 81% of accompanying partners who were employed at home cannot find work in the destination country. Increasingly, financial considerations alone are sufficient reason to decline the overseas assignment. Ms. Herring proposes a best practices policy of putting families first. This includes a thorough pre-departure needs assessment; pre-departure assistance and training; spouse career continuity options, and expatriate career development and coaching; and an emphasis on ongoing HR support in order to manage expat issues and expectations."

- This article first appeared in the XPAT Journal, Fall 2000 (<http://www.xpat.nl>)
- Source: <http://www.relojournal.com/feb2001/newexpats.htm>

To be reasonably effective the training for ALL people coming to Kazakhstan, or anywhere for that matter, must be:

- 1) Comprehensive – assess the candidates “mind-set” for an ability to work with ambiguity and international environmental peculiarities, assess the capability of the family to do the same. Focus on issues of character development (how the expatriate thinks and feels). This is important where people from the States are concerned as they must learn how to compensate for the “Ugly American” syndrome!
- 2) Realistic training periods – four hours is ludicrous! In order to maximize information retention, and minimize turnover, training should be spread out over a period of days.
- 3) On-going in nature – Just because someone has had “training” does not guarantee they have learned anything. There must be constant skill reinforcement as expatriates have a tendency to become complacent.

Do some looking for yourself at what is being written these days on this topic. Investigate carefully the courses and seminars offered by consultants and companies here. Most programs I have reviewed are woefully inadequate for the realities of business here! Even if you already have a programme in place, review it, revise it and test your assumptions constantly!! Excellent cross-culture programmes can be recognized by having two qualities, one I have eluded to in this article, care to take a guess at what the other quality is? Fell free to drop me a line if you do!

Other sources used in this article:

Ashamalla, Maali H. & Crocitto, Madeline 1997, Easing entry and beyond: Preparing expatriates and patriates for foreign assignment success *International Journal of Commerce & Management*, Indiana

Shay, Jeffery & Tracey, J. Bruce, February 1997, Expatriate Managers, *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Ithaca, New York.

Responsible comments, issues for discussion, questions and observations on doing business in Kazakhstan are always welcome and may be sent to Mr. Wright at:

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All reader submissions will be published and responded to as soon as is possible.

No names will be used unless specifically requested by the sender.