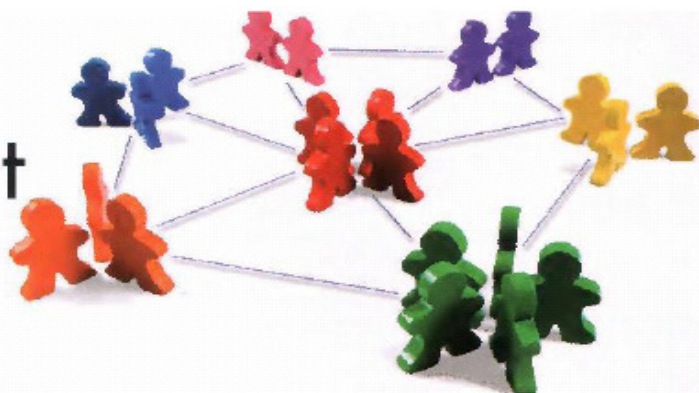


The same, only different

As globalisation continues apace, the need to know more about other cultures is growing – which is where training and learning and development come in handy.



The world may – communication-wise – have become a smaller place, and operating in a global economy is a way of life for many. But, says Richard Lewis, founder of language and cross-cultural training company Richard Lewis Communications, this has not led to a homogenisation of cultures where there is now one universal way of seeing the world. In fact, the very opposite is happening.

Closer together

“As the world gets flatter – as it were – culture gets to be a bigger issue. Travel, technology, cross-border mergers and acquisitions, political changes, media advances, global brands and offshoring all bring us closer together,” Lewis says.

“But change is stressful, and this makes us cling even more tightly to the ways of doing things we acquired first.”

And as more organisations globalise, or hit cultural barriers when entering a new geographical market, so more firms are adopting cross-cultural training, he says.

Lewis says there are many different circumstances where cross-cultural training is used. Ensuring multicultural



Matthew Judge, The Anvil Group



Inger Buus, Mannaz

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

With more than 3,000 international students from 130 different countries, the University of Bedfordshire has a reputation for attracting people from minority backgrounds.

According to its equality and diversity officer Shirani Gunawardena, as a cultural melting pot the university is continually developing its strategies in enabling “staff and students to communicate effectively with each other”.

Last year, it approached consultancy Communicaid to design a programme specifically for higher education professionals dealing with international students.

The programme created centred upon raising awareness of the sensitivity surrounding different cultural backgrounds and increasing the understanding of different behaviours and attitudes. The training introduced delegates to some of the key cultural differences and offered practical tips and strategies for working with international students. Experienced trainers then took interactive sessions, where delegates were able to practice the new techniques they had learnt.

teams work together better; preparing people who are off to live and work abroad; helping leaders to get messages across to a global workforce; and recruiting and retaining the best foreign workers are just some areas he mentions.

Lewis, whose company delivers training both on clients’ sites or as a residential course at its headquarters in Winchester, has developed a cross-cultural competence assessment that allows users to compare their cultural profile with up to 80 different cultures, and pinpoint the areas in which their own communication style differs.

Lewis says he has seen an increase in UK firms wanting to understand how Indian and Chinese business people work, while there continues to be a demand from firms wanting to learn how to conduct themselves when dealing with their US, German and Japanese counterparts.

But when it comes to business, a person’s culture is not just defined by the country they come from, argues Inger Buus, managing director at the UK office of people development consultancy Mannaz. She says cross-cultural learning is included in the company’s leadership development programmes.

Buus believes that sometimes a company culture is stronger than national identity, and that cultural divides also exist between different internal functions, such as sales, IT and finance.

“If you look at Citigroup, IBM and Unilever, they have very strong cultures. They come from different backgrounds, and have different values and management styles,” she says.

Good relationships

The understanding of these disparities is fundamental to a good working relationship with partners, ensuring the success of a merger or acquisition, or in enabling change management, she adds.

Buus says Mannaz consultants use the model on corporate culture developed by US organisational psychologist Edgar

Schein, who identified three distinct levels in organisational cultures: artifacts and behaviours, espoused values and assumptions.

She says: “Artifacts are the visible signs of a company culture – for example, the dress code and mission statements on the wall. Espoused values are a company’s plans and strategies, and assumptions are ‘how we do things around here.’”

Other examples of cross-cultural training include a recent initiative called Welcome Exchange, where firefighters and police staff in Lancashire were tutored in Polish culture, so they are better equipped to deal with the new influx of migrants from Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, cross-cultural consultancy Communicaid recently designed a programme for university tutors so they can work better with international students (see case study).

At crisis avoidance consultancy The Anvil Group, managing director Matthew Judge says his firm comes at cross-cultural awareness from a safety angle.

It works primarily with companies from the banking, oil and mining sector, whose people are often travelling to potentially dangerous places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa.

“By not making a cultural *faux pas*, workers travelling to hostile parts of the world are less likely to cause offence and to make themselves a target,” says Judge.

by Ross Bentley

FURTHER INFO

Richard Lewis Communications
www.crossculture.com

Mannaz
www.mannaz.com

Communicaid
www.communicaid.com

The Anvil Group
www.anvilgroup.com