

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20, 1993

AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

The Global economy of today requires that businesses transport work forces to new and unfamiliar areas creating a cultural shock phenomenon that should be lessened as much as possible. Several methods of aiding managers as they attempt to train workers for this change are discussed and a method involving role-playing and the possible evolution of a society are offered as possible solutions to the problem itself. A question and answer session format is provided to enable interested trainers to utilize this exercise in a classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

As our market place expands from national to global markets we encounter a host of golden opportunities disguised as insoluble problems awaiting us. Our growth is tied to the markets we serve, and merely servicing our United States customer base we shall experience an annual growth rate in the two to three percent range. Firms which were among the first in their industry to undertake global marketing have experienced much more rapid growth rates some as high as thirty percent. The fastest growing areas of our export market during recent years have been among the smallest in dollar volume of the top 40 exports; areas where smaller firms might well have a strong impact in the global field with proper marketing strategies. Add to this the fact that there often is less competition abroad than faced at home and the attraction becomes ever stronger.

Many firms initially engage in export marketing on a serendipitous basis where little thought is or was ever given to the prospects of such development. As orders are more actively sought and the prospects of ever greater involvement in this market increase we find ourselves contacting other cultures on their home territory more often than on our own. Toffler recognized the culture shock phenomenon over twenty years ago and warned travelers of places where yes meant no, where time means a part of a day, not a specific minute or even hour, when fixed prices mean we negotiate, and laughter denotes anger. (Toffler, 1970) Naisbitt opened the 1980's with his revealing predictions in Megatrends depicting the global world where changes go from an industrial to an information society, and even forecast the demise of USSR in the reorganization into decentralized societies instead of centralized ones. (Naisbitt, 1982)

We find ourselves transported to a different environment where our own old, familiar cues no longer have the meaning we thought they did, and we are unsure of ourselves. New arrivals become bewildered, confused, unsure of themselves, and to a greater or lesser extent, unable to cope with the totality of this new experience.

With time the new environment begins to become a bit more comfortable to us and our ability to cope increases. The growth process then is a slow one, evolving over time and with experience as one adjusts to the new environment. By the time we become acclimated we might also have alienated a portion of our potential market, a decisive danger to our success in this new venture.

THE PROBLEM FOR BUSINESS

Cultural adaptation is one of the more difficult aspects involved in our interactions with the internationalization of markets today. Decisions regarding a given target market must take into account the culture of the host nation so as to avoid constraints as we implement our marketing programs in environments outside our home nation.

Cultural taboos traditions, values and customs vary from place to place and one must adapt to them. Regrettably many elements of culture lack consistency even when there exists a geographical proximity with another nation of similar topography and climatology.

The need for acculturation exists, but the process is complicated when we attempt to activate our plan. One reason for this is attributed to the SRC, Self-Reference Criterion (Lee, 1966). When one is faced by a situation, which is unique to them, they apply their own cultural values to help understand and respond to the new situation. Personal space is one example of this phenomenon, which creates difficulties for many Americans visiting other cultures. Americans typically speak at a distance, which is proper for greeting; usually the distance at which one may shake hands with the conversational partner. Arabic cultures have a much closer personal space, often just a few inches, close enough to smell their breath. Many oriental cultures space themselves further apart than Americans to permit bowing. Violating another's spatial area is often offensive to them and should be avoided.

Lee proposes a four-step procedure for checking the influence of our SRC in business operations. First one should define the situation in terms of our own home cultural norms. Next the situation should be defined in terms of the norms of the host nation. Then the two should be compared and differences noted so as to determine the SRC. The problem is then redefined and solved for the optimal response. One obtains a picture of his or her own self reference criterion in terms of another culture.

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Awareness of the SRC on the part of management leads to a better understanding of the extent of the problem. Cultures do differ in so many ways that approaching each problem area with such an analysis can lead to extensive amounts of training and subsequent expense perhaps not justifiable on an input-output basis.

SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Solving the problem has incorporated many divergent strategies incorporating cross-cultural training, host nation employees instructing global aspirants in the ways of the native culture, sensitivity training sessions, linguistic training, area studies, and getting one's feet wet in the foreign market place through local involvement in the host nation to mention a few. Maddox recommends a cultural integrator be added to the staff of the global corporation (Maddox, 1988). Such a person should be familiar with the cultural needs of the host culture and capable of communicating these needs to others. This person must have both conceptual and human relation's skills to succeed.

These solutions offer some help to the organization attempting to go global, but involve the expenditure of considerable dollars for their effective implementation. Living the life in the host nation is perhaps the epitome, but many years training would be involved to obtain the level of linguistic skills sufficient to cope with conversations in a business environment. Words and context are both important in other cultures, with context often the principle communications vehicle.

There does exist a set of cultural universals possessed by all societies. These are based on similar needs and one would expect some of these to cross national boundaries. Murdock identified one series of these needs which include athletic sports, adornment of the body, calendar, cooking, courtship, dancing, dream interpretation, education, food taboos, inheritance rules, joking, kinship groups, status differentiation, and superstition (Murdock, 1945). The way in which these needs are met vary from culture to culture showing both similarities and dissimilarities.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is felt by many to provide a model of the ways in which cultures might change (Maslow, 1954). As a nation progresses from the subsistence economy satisfying basic physiological needs other needs begin to take precedence. Cultural adjustments become necessary as these changes take place. As workers leave farms and move to villages less dependence is placed on individual food production and more on the safety of having a supply readily available for family use. Industrializing nations begin to free women from some of their chores and permit other activities. As nations develop and families leave farms, new suppliers of such items as soap and cooking oils develop since they are no longer made in the home. This necessitates a change in purchase and usage patterns for these and other items. Further developments involving the trend toward a

service and information economy also involve additional cultural changes. Since the young are more amenable to change in society, a nation with a higher proportion of the youth segment should find the change process-taking place a bit more expeditiously.

A TALE OF TWO NATIONS

Our own American culture is distinctive in several ways from other nations. We are a materialistic culture, valuing possessions and following Veblen's conspicuous consumption in many of our purchase and usage patterns. We also are individualistic in our behavior conforming to personal tastes or the collective tastes of our small groups. Achievement is highly valued in our culture; we compete more than we cooperate. Japanese society differs in that the group is more important than the individual and seniority is quite important.

The historical development of each nation tends to point out some reasons for the importance placed on these areas. America was blessed with large land expanses including fertile soil and many resources. As families grew they could always go to new areas and build their own farms by individually working to achieve and obtain more for their efforts. Hardships were endured, but could be conquered. When the land wore out, there was new land to the west. Mobility and self-reliance were thus developed on the part of the individual and the group of neighbors living nearby. As a nation we have maintained an open door policy providing us with numerous cultures, traditions, and more open acceptance than is true with Japan. Newer groups arriving in our nation found that they could compete, often on their own terms, which frequently took on the guise of displays of strength through athletic contests. These new groups then demonstrated their success to peers through acquisition of material goods.

The Japanese however have a land-locked society with less opportunity to expand. Families owning property tended to keep it in the familial structure leading to larger family units of several generations. Interaction was then within a familial group headed by a patriarch. Cooperation became essential in such a situation, respect for age the norm.

Analyzing this and other situations in a logical method and deriving scenarios which students could identify with (or role play in) is useful in transferring ideas from one culture to another. Construct a scenario exposing the minds of the audience to a general situation, which faced a society at some point earlier in time. Then challenge them to brainstorm a series of "What If" questions. The results of such an exercise lead to a better understanding of the evolution of some cultural phenomena within our society.

This exercise was developed in several International Marketing classes at a

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Southern University. The situation and a series of questions were given to small groups for their responses after a period of interaction. The same scenario was provided to each of the groups participating in the exercise. After a twenty-minute discussion session each group then made a presentation of their individual analyses to the class at large. The questions and the responses that were provided by the groups exhibited a high degree of similarity.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXERCISE

The following exercise can be used to provide experience in the analysis of why some cultural values develop and provide a means of introducing the process of acculturating people to the evolutionary process where a society might develop and indicate some of the values and attitudes which could be possessed by such a society.

The exercise takes place in a pre-historic land of imagination, but the evolution might apply to many of our tribal societies of the world. The Eurasian Nomadic tribes and the American Plains Indians could have evolved along similar lines in their distant past. (Additional background information useful in understanding the environment relative to this situation can be found in Newark or Roberts among others).

The scenario is introduced to a group of trainees and their imaginations are asked to flow freely into the time warp created in their minds. Discussion groups of five are quite effective in this setting with larger groups broken into sub-groupings for their analysis.

A time frame of an hour is usually needed with the first twenty minutes for individual group discussion on three or four of the listed questions. Groups then present their analyses to the larger group for class discussion and comments.

HAND OUT

Experiential Exercise - Cultural environment

Transport yourself to a society, which is nomadic. A few farmers exist, but there are many nomadic tribes wandering around the territory on horseback. Most tribes are hunters and fishermen, but a few maintain small herds of animals needed for survival. These tribes are similar to our cowboys of the old west, riding small ponies that are highly maneuverable and have great stamina for long runs. A few cities exist in our area, and trade routes stretch from the West to the eastern extremes of our known world. Nation states have not yet developed, but a few seafaring cities have gained some footholds in areas where seaports are used in their trade.

(Only questions are supplied to groups; answers come from comments made during prior classroom analyses.)

1. What type wealth or property (George Carlin's STUFF) would such nomadic tribes have?

A- Lightweight, high value wealth symbols, protective clothing and tents, if an item is not useful it can become a burden.

2. What type weapons would you expect to find in this society? How would they be made or obtained?

A- Weapons probably picked up from the battlefield, a few developed locally from existing materials. Metals will be of low grade if any are used at all. Bows and arrows, spears probably wooden with flint or bone points.

3. How would such items be treated-prized or like most extendible items in the US today?

A- Highly prized, great value, treated with respect.

4. What type culture would you expect to find in such an environment? (Peaceable or more war-like, level of education, type of history available to them).

A- War-like, uneducated people, having a verbal history if any.

5. What value would property rights (real estate) of agrarians have in this society?

A- probably little value since it could be taken. Land would be viewed as needed for the livestock's use and as a survival item for the tribe.

6. What would be the source of power in a nomadic society? (How would leaders arise and maintain power?) Could a reputation be built by not winning wars?

A. -Strength or size of family would be of importance here. Some base of power must be built usually on strength. A reputation of terror would benefit some leaders, attacking with surprise, looting and rapidly retreating would be one strategy. Guerrilla warfare tactics might prove highly effective here also. Wars not won does not mean wars lost. A reputation might be built based solely on the bravado of the leader (eg PLO, Iraq.)

7. How can a leader explain the occurrence of droughts, floods, and great storms to his/her people?

A - Mysticism might arise, fate or Kismet. Gods might be thought of as vengeful; natural disasters would be the result of sins committed by the people. Leaders could use such events to further their causes.

8. What type religion would you anticipate arising here? One which treats others fairly, or one where God(s) (or perhaps fate) have much more impact?

A -Fairness would have less value to them than to the Judeo-Christian religions. Fate probably plays a strong role in the theology of such a primitive people. Animals might be active in this religion since they supply the food chain to the tribe.

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9. Would life have as much value to them as to us? (Life of their tribe members as compared to lives of others.)

A -Probably little value would be attributed to the lives of others outside the tribe. Tribal entities would be valued highly due to the scarcity of births and needs for active members so as to promulgate their collective being.

10. What implications do you see for trade among these people? What items would they trade and who are their customer groups? Would they be customer-oriented or sales oriented?

A -Probably trade would be principally among themselves and other tribes. Such trade would be for items not available in their area, spices, furs, food, jewels, weapons, slaves. Orientation would be toward sales, with a sense of the scarcity of the item itself adding value.

11. How would you expect them to bargain with their customer groups? How important is trade to such people?

A -If customers are fellow members of tribe, friendship would be developed. Closeness and trust would be important to them. Essential items will be traded, those which can be taken with the tribe will assume value as possessions, less portable items will have to prove themselves highly useful.

12. What role would women have in this society?

A -Nurturers probably, traditional female role in non-industrial societies. The stronger ones might also take part in battle. Early tribes scorched the right breasts of women so that they could use bows more effectively.

The purists among us will feel that liberties have been taken in the structure and interpretation of both questions and responses. The intent of this exercise is to provide a means whereby one can speculate on the possibilities, which could exist, not necessarily to prove or disprove a given piece of history. The possibility of interviewer bias is freely admitted as a possible contaminant.

Suggestions for future work: design a means to permit the group to examine their own preconceived notions regarding the several areas explored in the initial device. This would provide a type of base point self reference criterion to further enhance the analysis one has of his or her own cultural biases. With such pre-testing one could then determine where possible blind spots exist and where one might not be as open as others to new ideas or cultural value systems. The concept could lend itself to other types of scenario development as well.

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