

AN EXPATRIATE'S NIGHTMARE:
AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN COPING WITH OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENTS

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ABSTRACT

What happens when international experts are sent to a foreign country to train local workers? How can experts successfully complete their task given the unusual and confusing customs of the workers? This experiential exercise is designed to provide participants with an opportunity to practice coping with cultural differences in a manufacturing training scenario. This exercise has been successfully conducted in graduate and undergraduate classes in international management.

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural aspects of management are increasingly integrated into the business curricula as colleges and universities respond to the recognized need for a workforce that has a broad appreciation for the issues faced by managers in multicultural settings whether abroad or at home. This experiential exercise was designed to provide students with an interesting and fun way to experience some of the frustrations encountered by managers in overseas assignments while also providing a "safe" environment for their experimentation with coping strategies.

THE EXERCISE

Participants are assigned one of three roles. The first role is filled by a small group of participants who serve as "international experts" hired by a foreign government to train its people in the manufacture of a product. A second group of participants play the role of the citizens of Copernia, an intensely private and collectivist society with cultural customs and taboos that are unknown to outsiders. The third group of participants serves as anthropologists conducting research on the customs of the Copernians. Difficulties in coping with cultural differences are revealed as the international experts attempt to

train the Copernians in the construction of the product. The exercise provides participants with an opportunity to not only develop an appreciation for cultural differences but to actively experience them. Because the exercise involves a mythical culture and hypothetical training task, it can be effectively utilized to develop sensitivity to cultural differences in a variety of settings.

Exercise Objectives

The exercise has the following learning objectives:

1. *To provide students with an opportunity to explore some of the difficulties of international business through a task-related exercise.* Unlike other experiential exercises that use a non-business setting, this exercise requires students to conduct a training session for manufacture workers from another culture. Students respond well to the "realism" of the exercise and have little difficulty transferring the lessons learned to a business context.
2. *To provide students with an opportunity to experience an international business interaction from "the other side."* Because the exercise involves students playing the roles of workers from a different culture, they develop an appreciation for the often unintended consequences of an ethnocentric approach to international relationships. After completing the exercise, students display much greater understanding and sensitivity to the impact their actions and speech may have on the feelings of others.
3. *To demonstrate the importance of training and cultural preparation to the success of international ventures.* A central part of this exercise is that students in the expert role are

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ignorant of many of the cultural customs and beliefs of the people they are to train. Their lack of knowledge of even basic cultural customs serves as a hindrance to the accomplishment of any productive work. Students completing the exercise recognize the importance of advance cultural preparations to the selection and implementation of an appropriate training strategy.

4. *To demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate coping strategies for dealing with cultural differences in a work setting.* Past experience in conducting the exercise with either faculty or students in the expert role has demonstrated its power to elicit many unintentional examples of inappropriate coping strategies. In debriefing, the leader can point out these inappropriate approaches and suggest more appropriate methods. Because students in the trainee role can discuss how they felt when these inappropriate strategies were utilized, the exercise provides a powerful demonstration of the unintended impact of ethnocentric approaches.

Exercise Background

This experiential exercise is based on a session conducted in training expatriate employees for major corporations as described in Hagerty (1993). The exercise uses a paper model called a Hexaflexagon (Joint Council on Economic Education, 1992) as the focus of the training role-play. The roles have been carefully written to provide participants with customs and language differences that are based on actual cultural practices in different countries while avoiding insensitive stereotyping.

Past Participants Reaction to the Experience

Students and faculty members have expressed a strong positive reaction to the exercise experience. Comments from undergraduate students indicate that the Hexaflexagon exercise is very helpful in increasing their sensitivity to cultural differences

Several students reported successfully using some of the suggestions presented in debriefing to explore cultural differences with foreign students. Students who served as “experts” commented that while they found the experience to be frustrating, they felt more confident in dealing with future multicultural experiences as a result of what they had learned.

CONCLUSION

The importance of this type of an experience for students and managers in today’s business environment is demonstrated in the following quote, “It is now generally recognized that culturally insensitive attitudes and behaviors stemming from ignorance or from misguided beliefs (“my way is best,” or “what works at home will work here”) not only are inappropriate but are often the cause of international business failure” (Dowling, Schuler & Welch, 1994: 13). An awareness of cultural differences is critical for success in a multicultural environment. This exercise has been proven to be an effective way to provide participants with an opportunity to not only learn about cultural differences but to experience them in a meaningful yet fun way.

Complete directions for the exercise are included in Morris (1997).

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