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PREPARING MANAGERS FOR OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENTS

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Abstract

The materials known as the Culture General Assimilator (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, and Yong, 1986) were designed to prepare people for overseas assignments. The term "general" refers to the goal of providing orientation to assignments no matter the exact place in the world to which people will be travelling. In the development of the materials, reports of impactful events were gathered from overseas businesspeople, diplomat's technical assistance advisers, and others. Together with a literature review, the impactful intercultural experiences so identified formed the basis of 100 critical incidents. These 100 incidents are organized around 18 thematic categories that can provide a common vocabulary for the discussion of intercultural encounters.

Introduction

A culture general assimilator has been developed to communicate the commonalities that exist in all extensive intercultural contact. A benefit of the culture assimilator approach is that it captures how people really think about their intercultural interactions. People think in terms of the "war stories" in which they participated or which they observed: the times they made mistakes, their lack of ability to get tasks accomplished, their misunderstandings with people in the host culture. These stories include memories of specific people who behaved in certain ways, and the stories had impactful outcomes that were important enough so that people wanted to share them with others. Each critical incident within a culture assimilator captures an experience or story likely to happen to people who move across cultural boundaries.

An Example of the 100 Incidents

The best way to introduce this set of materials is to examine one of the 100 incidents in the collection, together with the alternative explanations of the incident. In formal training programs, participants would read and discuss the incident, either as part of a plenary session lead by the trainer, or as members of small groups.

Who's in Charge?

The president of Janice Tani's firm asked her, as chief executive of the marketing division, and her staff (three male MBAs) to set up and close an important contract with a Japanese firm. He thought his choice especially good as Janice (a Japanese American from California) knew the industry well and could also speak Japanese.

As she and her staff were being introduced, Janice noticed a quizzical look on Mr. Yamamoto's face and heard him repeat "chief executive" to his assistant in an unsure manner. After Janice had presented the merits of the strategy in Japanese, referring to notes provided by the staff, she asked Mr. Yamamoto what he thought. He responded by saying that he needed to discuss some things further with the head of her department. Janice explained that was why she was there. Smiling, Mr. Yamamoto replied that they had done an especially good job of

explaining, but that he wanted to talk things over with the person in charge. Beginning to be frustrated, Janice stated that she had authority for her company. Mr. Yamamoto glanced at his assistant, still smiling, and he arranged to meet with Janice at another time. Why did Mr. Yamamoto keep asking Janice about the executive in charge?

(1) He did not really believe that she was actually telling the truth about who she was. (2) He had never heard the term "executive" before and did not understand the meaning of "chief executive. (3) He had never personally dealt with a woman in Janice's position, and her language ability caused him to think of her in another capacity. (4) He really did not like her presentation and did not want to deal with her firm. (5) He was attracted to her and wanted to meet with her alone.

For this incident, most trainees select alternative number three as their first or second choice. Alternative number four also provides a good basis for discussion, with many trainees pointing out that the behavior in the incident could be an indirect way of indicating disapproval, and that Americans have difficulties reading indirect behaviors. For alternative three, trainees read and discuss the following.

This is a good response. Generally, in Asia, although women are found in all strata in the working world, very few, especially in the Japanese world, are in positions where they have a great deal of authority over men. There are more cases where they would be working quite closely with someone with that authority but not possess the actual authority themselves. The fact that Janice was using Japanese where many of her assistants did not also added to the confusion of her role.

The general theme, then, behind the specifics of this incident is "role and role differences." This distinction between the specifics of incidents and underlying themes is crucial to understanding the culture general assimilator. The 100 incidents are simply ways of giving life to, and generating trainee interest in, a set of 18 themes that are common to all extensive intercultural contact. Understanding the 18 themes is of great assistance in preparing trainees for the specific intercultural experiences they will have during their specific assignments. Trainees are not expected to remember all of the 100 incidents in the training package, but it is hoped that they will have a good command of the 18 themes and will see their usefulness in analyzing people's intercultural experiences.

Reference

Brislin, R., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C., & Yong, M. (1986). Intercultural interactions: a practical guide. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.