CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES
IN TRAINING

BY NEIL SHORNEY

Having an awareness of other cultures is an accepted part of modern business life. In most industries, multiculturalism comes with the job. We work with people from other countries and the majority of business people know enough about these countries' traditions and communication styles that we rarely cause offense to others through our ignorance of someone else's race, religion or customs.

This might not have been the case 15 years ago, but the ease with which we can communicate across the globe means that most of us are now very comfortable speaking to people with different backgrounds.

But, does this mean that we should stop learning? No.

Although we may not cause offense very often, there's a big difference between knowing how not to upset people and knowing how to really engage them at a level at which they will excel.

There's more to cultural awareness than simply being polite. And, there are several challenges trainers face when teaching an ethnically-mixed group, or when they train a group from one culture, which is different from their own.

But, the most valuable attribute of a successful international trainer isn't an in-depth knowledge of many different countries (although this helps), but rather, an awareness that everyone is different and that the flexibility to adapt to these differences and deliver maximum value to course participants.

DIFFERENCES IN BEHAVIOR

A behavior that is acceptable in one culture may not be so in another. For example, it may not be wise to send a female trainer to teach in the Middle East because a woman doesn't always have equality with a man there, and men often prefer learning from members of the same sex. In turn, learners in that part of the world will most likely get more value from a male instructor.

Many may not agree or understand this cultural difference, but this is an accepted cultural standard there. There are also other facts that people have to accept, including cultural differences and views on punctuality, phone use during a training course, and how to address other individuals. Understanding some of these key differences is a vital foundation to build rapport with course participants.

DIFFERENCES IN HIERARCHY

Along with behavioral differences, every culture has its own set of inequalities in terms of hierarchy. For example, in Japan, which is another male-dominated region, hierarchy is highly regarded. Someone's position in a company can become almost more important than anything else, which requires a number of sensitivities on the part of the trainer.

The society is fairly complex with differences in language and the depth of your bow upon meeting someone is vital to making a good first impression. A Japanese businessperson is expected to know how they compare with the other person in order to ensure they bow to a lower point, thus demonstrating this awareness of their inferiority. There is even a different set of vocabulary that is used when addressing a superior and when addressing a peer or someone more junior.

If it's clear that a student in a training course is more senior, then due respect should be shown and it would be a blunder to cause embarrassment to this person in front of more junior employees, such as asking a question to which the answer isn't known.

Rank within a company is one of the most important aspects of Japanese business society and the business card is the main way of expressing who someone is to another person. When a business card is offered, it should be taken in both hands and studied for at least 10 seconds before carefully placing in a wallet. It should never be written on, and certainly not be placed in a back pocket where it could be sat on.

DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

There are various communication style assessments on the market and a particularly effective assessment is from the HRDQ Store called "What's My Communication Style," which places people into one of four categories: direct, spirited, systematic or considerate.

THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING HOW NOT TO UPSET PEOPLE AND KNOWING HOW TO REALLY ENGAGE THEM AT A LEVEL AT WHICH THEY WILL EXCEL

Interestingly, when this assessment is used on mixed groups there can be national leanings toward one

STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM: WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE

At a training course in London that included people from eight different countries, one person (let's name him Person A) was a senior manager from an African country who was experiencing London's night life – out late, drinking heavily and arriving late the next day. In his culture, this was acceptable as he was very important within his organization.

Person B was on his first trip abroad after a sheltered life in Kazakhstan. He was Muslim and didn't drink at all. Person B arrived on time to the course and introduced himself to others in the group. Two hours later, Person A arrived at the end of a team exercise with no apology and the scent of last night's beer on his breath. He sat next to Person B and when the instructor asked each group to present their conclusions from the exercise, the latecomer demanded that Person B stand up and present. A huge argument ensued and the instructor had to keep them apart for the duration of the course.

Taking action, the instructor made the decision to facilitate different teams separately to minimize the risk of these two individuals clashing again. The decision resulted in both individuals bringing value to their respective groups. This real scenario outlines the sensitivities that instructors must be aware of when facilitating a training program with different nationalities.

type over another. According to the assessment, the Dutch tend to be more direct than the Japanese and English women tend to be more considerate than German men. None of this is good or bad, but it does affect the interpersonal communication within a learning group to the extent that learners from some nationalities may be less willing to speak up during a course than others.

REAL LIFE EFFECTS
Behavior, hierarchy and communication style are just three of the many differences that can exist within international training groups. Let's consider how a mixture of these three might make or break a training course:

- In a room of Japanese business people, someone senior might be struggling with a topic, but, he confidently tells everyone that he understands because there are more junior people in the room and he doesn't want to lose face. The result: he doesn't benefit from the training.
- In a mixed group, the shy Austrian lady doesn't share her knowledge because she's overpowered by the brash American man. The result: her group fails to benefit from her experience and she feels undervalued.
- In a group of French Canadians, where some people find English difficult, the instructor speaks quickly, assuming they understand. The result: misunderstood content.
- An English trainer begins a course with a couple of crude jokes as an ice-breaker in France, where people prefer trainers to be professional and serious. The result: lost credibility and lack of rapport with the class.

A trainer must consider two things

in order to effectively handle these situations: how to best interact with the participants and how to help them interact with each other.

INTERACTING WITH PARTICIPANTS
One of the biggest challenges for a trainer can be working remotely with a group, such as in a live e-learning environment where there is no visual interaction and perhaps 20 or 30 voices on the line. This can be particularly challenging if the trainer is working in a new market. For example, while a course run for a North American audience might be more interactive, a course run for a Chinese audience can be completely different, as they tend to be unwilling to speak up in such an environment.

When there's a danger that a course could turn into a monologue, a possible solution with a quiet audience, either in the classroom or virtually, is to ask more direct questions. For example, asking "Does anyone need me to go over that again?" might elicit silence, whereas rephrasing it as "I've got time to go over some things again – which topics would you prefer me to cover" can force people to open up more and share their learning needs.

UNDERSTANDING KEY DIFFERENCES IS A VITAL FOUNDATION TO BUILD RAPPORT WITH COURSE PARTICIPANTS

HELPING PARTICIPANTS INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER
A trainer should not only be a good communicator, but also an expert facilitator. These facilitation skills help students to get the maximum value from a course because they shouldn't just learn from the instructor and materials, but from each other. Without the intervention of a facilitator, there

can be a tendency toward either silence or the group being dominated by a small number of people. The effect of this is that quieter students don't share their experience and ideas, and everyone essentially loses out.

A skilled facilitator will bring all participants into the conversation in a way that is sensitive both to national characteristics and personal qualities, vastly increasing the value for all.

Neil Shorney is director of Naturally Sales Ltd, *a UK-based training company.* Email Neil.