

Assignees from One Nation in the Business Culture of Another: A DISCUSSION-STARTER

A composite article, based on selected publications of GROVEWELL LLC, for use during training

Assignees from one nation entering the business culture of another often have perplexed or irritated initial reactions. GROVEWELL works with them; we often hear comments like this:

Typical Comment of a Recent Arrival to the U.S.: “The Americans who received me were warm, friendly, and welcoming, but this didn't last. I've pretty much been left alone in my cubicle since Day Two. They give me very little guidance, yet expect me to get useful work done almost instantly. They say, ‘We need you to hit the ground running!’ But how can I do *that*? I have no idea how to find out what I need to know in order to be productive here. My questions to colleagues yield only snippets of information. The smiles of my co-workers do nothing to reverse my deepening sense of isolation.”

So what's going on? Explanations alluding to anyone's ignorance, apathy, or malice don't fit the facts. These assignees were stars in their native lands; their hosts are competent and well-meaning. What's going on here is a cross-cultural difference that undermines communication. Two cases:

The Case of Ms. A

Ms. A went to São Paulo from New Jersey, where she held an important and relatively senior position. She was assigned to work with a Brazilian supervisor who recognized that she was an able individual; consequently, he quickly gave her several responsibilities.

Within a few weeks, Ms. A was visibly and vocally upset. The disconnect that emerged in her case concerned how relationships are conducted in a professional work environment. Being an American, Ms. A's assumed that getting work done with high efficiency was the top priority, with excellent relationships being no more than a “nice-to-have” outcome. Her supervisor, being from Brazil, assumed that establishing and maintaining warm, smooth, trusting relationships was the highest priority, a priority that in turn made productive work possible. Two aspects of this difference:

How do professionals talk with one another? From Ms. A's U.S. perspective, individuals need to insure that they talk to each other in a way that's basically civil. But the goal of working together is to get things done, and done well, which is not about niceties.

From the supervisor's perspective, individuals in any sustained relationship need to insure that positive harmony is openly maintained. In practice, this means that they must use nonverbal as well as verbal means to cultivate the perception in others that they are *simpatico* – accessible, warm, and caring. To him, Ms. A's careful, civil language was experienced as insincere. To Ms. A, the supervisor's *simpatico* manner also was experienced as insincere.

What are appropriate activities together? Brazil is a relationship-oriented culture, which plays itself out in daily life when individuals devote lengthy stretches of time to unhurried, warm, friendly talking about all sorts of things...even about work! Tasks take up most of an individual's time, but relationship-building takes up a significant proportion his or her time.

The U.S. is a task-oriented culture, meaning that the bulk of one's time in a work environment should be devoted to tasks and projects. During working hours, it's acceptable to converse about matters that aren't task-related, but not too long! Ms. A interpreted the supervisor's readiness to “chat aimlessly” about non-work matters as showing his lack of fitness for high responsibilities. But he viewed her dismissive attitude to wide-ranging conversations as brusque and disrespectful.

The Case of Mr. B

Mr. B was the first individual from his Japanese division sent to the U.S. His home division said that his assignment as "developmental," and he viewed himself as a trainee. Soon after arriving at his new division, Mr. B was assigned to an internal trainer, an American responsible for Mr. B's learning according to a set of objectives set jointly by the two divisions.

Soon Mr. B reported confusion and dissatisfaction. It became apparent that, although there had been direct communication between the sending and receiving divisions regarding this program, there had been little mutual understanding. The sending division had stated broad objectives such as upgrading Mr. B's ability to communicate in English and enabling him to improve his abilities as a global manager. These objectives were easy for the American receiving division to accept. But the Americans interpreted the objectives quite differently from what the Japanese side had in mind. A related issue was that Mr. B's expectations regarding training methods were at variance with those of his American trainer. Their differences touched on three levels of the learning process:

How do individuals best learn? From Mr. B's perspective, learning is accomplished through watching, listening, and talking with people: immersion. He expected to absorb new information by participating in a wide variety of culturally and functionally different situations.

From the American trainer's point of view, learning is accomplished through active, hands-on completion of carefully chosen tasks and assignments that have specific, measurable learning outcomes. He viewed immersion/absorption as merely passive and thus a waste of time.

How do trainers and trainees interact? Mr. B was accustomed to a supportive senior-junior relationship between trainer and trainee. Although he hoped to absorb information, he also was accustomed to receiving assignments; in this case, he expected instructions from the trainer on the nature of various tasks and the process of completing them. He assumed that he, as trainee, would follow instructions, and that the trainer, a knowledgeable guide and authority, would be responsible for insuring successful learning outcomes.

The trainer expected to set learning tasks for trainees, then to provide little support. He assumed that trainees learn best when using a do-it-yourself, trial-and-error approach. The American viewed trainers and trainees as near-equals; he viewed trainees as self-reliant and capable of accepting responsibility for insuring successful outcomes of their learning. He also believed that trainees may negotiate with trainers about the nature of assignments.

What are appropriate learning objectives? Japan is a "high context" culture, which means that it's one in which people constantly communicate with colleagues and friends about a huge range of topics, and thereby come to have a comprehensive grasp of people, events, procedures, social and political realities -- in short, the entire *context* of their daily lives. When people who already are "high-contexted" work together, their communication about any specific matter, even an important new matter, tends to be relatively brief. That's possible because they all share an understanding of the contextual factors directly and indirectly impinging upon it.*

The U.S. is a "low context" culture in which people communicate with others *comparatively* less thoroughly, and less comprehensively about a huge range of possible topics. Thus, low context people are not as well informed about the overall context of their daily lives. So when low context people work together, their communication about an important new matter requires sustained and explicit attention about details and contextual factors in order to "get everyone on the same page."

* Note that the *process of becoming* highly contexted inevitably involves extensive communication over lengthy time-spans.