

On the Design and Delivery of Intercultural Training (Properly Understood)

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Executive Summary

Intercultural training improves the on-the-job performance of businesspeople who interact at home or abroad with counterparts from unfamiliar cultures.

Intercultural training succeeds by helping trainees to modify (1) the way they interpret human relationships and (2) certain features of their own behavior.

Because this training helps trainees to modify their mindsets and behavior, the role of a face-to-face trainer with specific qualifications is indispensable.

Because the training helps trainees modify their mindsets and behavior, at least a full day is indispensable so that changes can be understood and practiced.

Benefits to trainees become benefits to the trainees' employer, enabling the latter to more readily and thoroughly attain its evolving global objectives.

In the case of expatriates, the benefits of intercultural training are available for a cost as low as 0.01% of the total cost of their international assignments.

Intercultural training draws its concepts, insights, and methods from a 45-year-old social scientific research tradition.

Much training that *claims* to be "intercultural" or "cross-cultural" actually is not; such training merely transmits facts available from other sources.

Intercultural training (properly understood) is about behavior modification.

On the Design and Delivery of Intercultural Training (Properly Understood)

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PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

This paper clarifies the nature and benefits of intercultural training. *But it's not about just any intercultural training.* Rather, it's about "intercultural training (properly understood)," i.e., training with the mission of improving the on-the-job performance and effectiveness of businesspeople who interact with counterparts from unfamiliar cultures. It accomplishes this by . . .

- drawing on the research-generated insights of interculturalists over the past 40 years
- applying these insights to the evolving needs of businesses pursuing global objectives
- delivering programs that are *client- and challenge-driven*, not merely content- or fact-driven.

A great deal of training that *claims* to be "intercultural" or "cross-cultural" actually lacks all three of the key characteristics above. Because many corporate decision-makers are familiar with only the inadequate variety, they understandably decide to offer intercultural training using time- and money-saving methods such as very short "briefings" or an on-line learning format.

This paper explains why intercultural training (properly understood) can be effective only when delivered by *qualified trainers in a face-to-face workshop lasting a minimum of one full day.*

CONTENTS: This paper has five sections:

1. WHAT IS PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED INTERCULTURAL TRAINING? Provides an explanation of the nature of intercultural training (properly understood), and describes six training activities.
2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER? States the background needed by an effective intercultural trainer, and explores the indispensable role of the trainer in the delivery process.
3. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED TRAINING? Succinctly states benefits in terms of individuals' improved competencies *and* companies' enhanced capacities abroad.
4. IS PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED TRAINING COST-EFFECTIVE? Compares typical costs of performance-focused training with the total of *all* costs associated with international assignments.
5. INTERCULTURAL TRAINING IS HEIR TO A RESEARCH TRADITION. Reveals the origins of intercultural training and describes the social scientific research tradition out of which this training arises.

1. WHAT IS PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED INTERCULTURAL TRAINING?

Here is a brief definition of intercultural training (properly understood):

Intercultural training is the transmission to trainees of concepts and behavioral competencies generated through intercultural research that enable them to *more quickly* become *professionally productive* and *interpersonally effective* when working at home or abroad with counterparts from an unfamiliar culture.

Three key features of this definition are important to note:

- The training is intended to improve individuals' *on-the-job performance and effectiveness*.
- The training is *grounded in research*, a brief overview of which is provided in Section 5.
- The training emphasizes *practical application in business relationships involving people from different cultures*. It is *not* about facts and statistics regarding a country, its people, or its economy, all of which the trainees can readily acquire from print- and web-based resources.

MISSION OF THE TRAINING: Given this definition, what is the mission of intercultural training?

Performance-focused intercultural training enables trainees to grasp the value-base underlying the patterned behavior of members of an unfamiliar group (e.g., Belgians), *and* to grasp the value-base underlying the patterned behavior of *people in their own* group (e.g., Americans). These differences in values and resulting patterned behaviors are compared and contrasted.

Trainees are brought to a deepening recognition of how differences in values can easily result in differences in patterns of behavior, both overt and subtle. Far from being of merely theoretical interest, *these behavior differences have real-time, real-life consequences that often have a detrimental impact on the personal relationships that form the basis for all business dealings*.

Trainees learn that clashes and misunderstandings between businesspeople from different cultures are usually *predictable*, and thus *preventable*. They also learn *how to learn* in new cultural environments.

Trainees discover that, with certain adjustments in their own behavior, *their performance abroad can be just as high as it was at home*. They think about, strategize for, and sometimes practice the enactment of nuanced behavioral skills that will enable them to readily fit in to, and be more productive in, business situations involving people from other cultures.

The learning of the trainees is reinforced by exercises, case studies, discussions of their own prior experiences, and research findings distilled so they can be readily applied by businesspeople.

EXAMPLES OF TRAINING: Following are examples of the performance-focused training.

- A. Each trainee is asked to analyze the nature of his or her job in the host country. What are the key tasks that will characterize daily life at the office or plant? (Eight categories are offered, including "Working in a Team" and "Marketing, Sales, Relations with Clients.") The trainer then discusses with the trainees the basic approaches and value-laden nuances common among businesspeople in the trainees' host culture(s) as they perform those tasks.

Finally, under the trainer's guidance, trainees consider ways in which each may need to modify his or her usual ways of doing things to achieve a better "fit" with the host business culture.

- B. Trainees are helped to recognize that, by being socialized in their home culture, they have typical behaviors that seem right and good to themselves. . .but that seem to supervisors and colleagues in their host culture to be perplexing or unproductive or even infuriating.

A typical example concerns whether an employee should take initiative (as in the U.S.), or whether he or she should wait to be directed what to do (as in many other cultures). Trainees new to the U.S., for example, strategize about and actually practice verbal and behavioral approaches for taking initiative, which at first is a remarkably difficult thing for them to do.¹

- C. Trainees are introduced to the concept of "face" (as in "saving face"). Not widely recognized in Western European cultures, the face concept is a critical feature of all relationships in Asia, and in Latin America and Africa as well. Businesspeople who are crossing in either direction what might be called the "face boundary" can benefit from awareness and skill training.

U.S. trainees who will interact with face-conscious counterparts are helped to understand that, in subtle ways, face *does* influence relationships in U.S. culture; they are then shown how concern for face is applied by businesspeople from other cultures. For example, U.S. supervisors are taught how to ask an Asian direct report if he has understood something. Asian direct reports are taught how to respond when asked how a project is progressing.²

¹ For example, during their assignments in the U.S., newcomers from abroad are often expected (but not overtly requested) to take the initiative to be included on a project team. Since this expectation never existed in their home workplaces, they don't know what to do and remain non-engaged for long periods of time. The result is wasted manpower plus growing doubts in the minds of U.S. supervisors and colleagues about the newcomers' capabilities. The newcomers perceive the change in attitude and withdraw defensively. Thus begins a difficult-to-reverse "downward spiral," with each side thinking more and more negatively about the other. Thanks to research and customized training design, this barrier to productivity can be readily avoided by intercultural trainees.

² The problem is that, in a face-conscious culture, subordinates are conditioned to not say things that will bring disappointment to their supervisors. So if a U.S. supervisor asks an Asian direct report if she has understood something, she probably will say "yes" even if she hasn't understood it. If the supervisor asks how a project is progressing, the Asian is likely to answer "fine," no matter what. Training can eliminate such miscommunication.

- D. Using a graphic conceptual model and a case study of a widely recognized behavior of their fellow countrymen, trainees are introduced to the durable link between (1) the core values of their own culture, and (2) certain patterns of behavior of members of their culture. This helps to introduce the critical link between values and behaviors, which applies in *all* cultures.

This link between a people's values and behaviors is the foundation for all genuine intercultural training. An often-discussed example is the U.S. value constellation of individualism, assertive-ness, and competition on the one hand and, on the other hand, the habit of U.S. firms of conferring advancement and monetary rewards on star individual performers, not teams.

- E. Subtle differences in communication styles are explored. Attention is given to a research-generated value distinction offering numerous insights into communication barriers known to undermine business relationships. Trainees may consider. . .
- step-by-step behavioral guidelines for crossing from one communication style into the other in the applicable direction (such as people from the U.S.A. entering China or Japan);
 - action steps for newcomers dealing with acute feelings of isolation, which undermine the productivity of newcomers who have crossed a "communication barrier" in *either* direction;
 - action steps for supervisors of newcomers from abroad, because the latter come expecting a type of supervisor-subordinate relationship that seems inappropriate to the former.³
- F. It is known that businesspeople from certain hierarchical cultures are perceived by colleagues in egalitarian cultures to have a personal style that is rude and arrogant, which damages collegial relationships. Another feature of their style may involve assumptions about the role of women in the workplace, which of course can lead to disastrous litigation against the firm.

Trainees from hierarchical cultures are helped to recognize elements in their daily behavior — their expectations of others, their choice of words, and their tone of voice — that lead them to be disliked and avoided. They are taught, step-by-step, how to behave and fit in.⁴

³ For example, a Japanese newcomer expects his U.S. supervisor to spend a great deal of time, especially at the beginning, to help him broadly understand the overall local business setting and all of its players. The U.S. supervisor expects the Japanese newcomer to behave "like an American" and take the initiative to learn on his own, not realizing how much direct support the Japanese must have in order to grasp the "context" that he needs to function at peak levels. Both the Japanese and the American are behaving according to cultural values deeply ingrained since earliest childhood. With training, however, they can learn to overcome this barrier to productivity.

⁴ For example, newcomers in the U.S. from India have no idea how Americans perceive their (heretofore acceptable) behaviors. Most Indian trainees are profoundly grateful when our trainers alert them to behaviors that will be abhorred by Americans. The training event provides a safe place for the Indians to practice new behaviors.

THE TRAINING IS NOT ABOUT FACTS: We believe that corporate decision-makers who purchase very short or very inexpensive training programs termed "intercultural" or "cross-cultural" are assuming that it is something different from the complex performance-focused, research-grounded training described in the examples above. They often assume it's about transmitting readily learned facts.

Examples abound of "intercultural" training emphasizing trivial facts. Here are two:

1. During 2001, an article appeared in the *Sunday New York Times Magazine* in which difficulties between Germans and Americans at the U.S. headquarters of DaimlerChrysler were dissected. The author noted that intercultural training had been provided, but dismissed it because he'd discovered during interviews that one of its significant learnings had been that an American should never keep his left hand in his pocket while shaking hands with a German.
2. Recently we found the website of a Michigan-based relocation firm offering destination services for inbound families. Under CULTURAL ORIENTATION, it lists "common topics" as (1) Cultural adjustment phases, (2) Geographic overview, (3) Education system in Michigan, (4) Personal safety & crime, (5) Business protocol in the Midwest, and (6) Regional differences in the U.S.

If intercultural training were about keeping your left hand unpocketed while using your right hand to greet another person, we'd understand when decision-makers conclude, "No, thank you!"

And if intercultural training were genuinely about discrete bits of information such as . . .

- cultural adjustment phases (culture shock decreases after six weeks),
- local geography (the best transportation arteries into Detroit are...),
- personal safety (don't walk into such-and-such neighborhood!),
- the educational system (middle school comprises grades 5, 6, 7, 8), and
- local business protocol (business casual isn't the done thing around here). . . ,

then we'd agree when decision-makers confine it to a two-hour "briefing" or expect it to be offered on-line. Transmission of *that* kind of information does not require the skills of a trainer.

But intercultural training (properly understood) is *not* the transmission of facts about one's new environment. It's *not* etiquette training. It's *not* "do's and don't's." It's *not* a short course in a nation's history and economy. It's *not* hints for becoming comfortable in your new community.

All of the above are marketed, sold, and delivered as "intercultural training." That is wrong.

2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER?

The mission of intercultural training cannot be accomplished quickly or mechanically. What is required for its successful accomplishment is one or two people in the front of the training room (or one or two coaches working with an individual) who combine two indispensable qualities:

1. They have extensive, recent business experience in the country that is the focus of the training.
2. They are mature, empathetic human beings, skilled in the delivery of training aimed at behavioral change, knowledgeable about intercultural concepts, and experienced globally.⁵

Why have we described both of these qualities as “indispensable”?

Consider the first quality listed above. In order for the nuances of the target culture’s values, mindsets, and behaviors to be available to trainees, someone with relevant experience freshly in mind is needed. Deep understanding by trainees is more likely to occur when there’s someone to tell stories and offer “for instances.” And there are always questions about myriad details of daily life. There’s no substitute for authoritative answers. Book knowledge won’t do because it’s not responsive to specific issues. Someone who left “the old country” years ago won’t be up to date.

There’s a good reason as well why we regard the second quality listed above as indispensable. It’s related to the fact that most trainees have given little or no objective thought to *their own* habitual patterns of behavior, nor to the values that give direction to their behaviors, and certainly not to the values and patterns of behavior of others from unfamiliar cultures.

*But the giving of objective thought to one’s own, and others’, values and behaviors is an essential feature of genuine intercultural training.*⁶

What is happening in most training rooms is that many trainees are having their eyes opened — gradually, sometimes reluctantly — to a framework for participating in human relationships that is quite new to them. They need to be guided into this fresh perspective on the world.

For example, all trainees are expected to learn how to compare their own values and behaviors with those of people in a part of the world previously unknown by them. They are expected to develop plans for making adjustments to their habitual ways of interpreting the behaviors of others, *and* to their habitual ways of working with and relating to those others.

⁵ Sometimes the two qualities can be made available in the person of a single trainer. But sometimes it is necessary for there to be two training deliverers: a lead trainer (or coach) and a country/culture resource person.

⁶ Another essential feature of intercultural training is that it addresses the role of “trailing” spouses in the overall productivity of the business assignee. Research shows that the factor most responsible for premature returns home by business assignees is *spousal maladjustment*. Dealing effectively with spouses is of paramount importance to the success of intercultural training. Interculturalists know how to help spouses to adjust better.

MATURE, EXPERIENCED, AND CARING: Methods and materials play a role in attaining these objectives. But the critical component is a special kind of human being at the front of the room. We speak of “mature, experienced, and caring” because we’ve found that success is far more readily attained when the trainer has personally weathered the vicissitudes of life, has suffered from not knowing how to act in a foreign location, has personally benefited from intercultural wisdom, and now communicates a passion for enabling newcomers abroad to get things right.⁷

Because behavioral modification is the desired outcome, intercultural training depends on the trainees’ developing *trust* in their trainer. They need to sense the trainer’s empathy and caring with respect to their success abroad. Why?

Trainees are being asked to revise the way they interpret human relationships, and they’re being asked as well to revise features of their behavior that, up until now, have made them feel competent and confident.

Consequently, many trainees need to be patiently coaxed and skillfully guided so that they’ll discover surprising insights about the behavior of human beings, not only those in foreign lands but also those close to home. . .including themselves!

THE TIME FACTOR: Besides a trainer they can trust, trainees need *sufficient time* to allow these new awarenesses, mindsets, and skills to emerge and gain a foothold in their minds and emotions. This is why training should never be less than a full day.

Sufficient concepts, insights, and exercises are readily available to enable the development of training designs that profitably make use of a week or even more.

We recommend that, whenever possible, training or coaching should occur over at least two days.

⁷ In addition to the many private, informal “thank yous” that our firm has received from trainees, we recall a young man from India who spoke publicly, a year after we had trained him, to the new crop of inbound trainees during a company forum. Mentioning his trainer by name, he described how practical and valuable his training a year before had been. He said the training had alerted him to value-based differences in behaviors, with the result that he experienced few surprises in the host country and had an adjustment with no major hurdles.

3. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED TRAINING?

The trainees. . .	Therefore, their employer. . .
<p>...learn to make reasonably accurate predictions regarding the likely behaviors of host national business counterparts, e.g., negotiators;</p>	<p>...increases the likelihood of efficiently attaining business objectives abroad, and thus profitability.</p>
<p>...recognize and practice the nuances of appropriate behavior abroad in specific face-to-face relationships, e.g., supervisor-subordinate;</p>	<p>...avoids losses due to unproductivity while each new arrival painfully learns how to gain trust.</p>
<p>...plan for effectively integrating themselves into their new project groups or teams of culturally diverse colleagues abroad;</p>	<p>...gains creative problem-solving and other efficiencies resulting from quick newcomer integration.</p>
<p>...develop strategies for performing specific tasks and functions well in the new cultural context, e.g., making persuasive presentations;</p>	<p>...attains more rapidly the global objectives for which the employer assigned these employees to handle global responsibilities.</p>
<p>...gain insight into effective patterns of two-way communication across cultures: face-to-face, phone-to-phone, voicemail, e-mail, etc.;</p>	<p>...maximizes effective use of global resources, and enhances the firm's shared global culture.</p>
<p>...practice revising their own personal styles in order to facilitate acceptance by, and good working relations with, colleagues and counterparts abroad;</p>	<p>...avoids the financial loss and inefficiency resulting from an employee's bad performance or (in the case of expats) premature return.</p>
<p>...learn to avoid jumping to the conclusion that the unfamiliar behavior of a business associate abroad is due to ignorance, apathy, or malice;</p>	<p>...insures that developing relationships with key customers and suppliers are not undermined.</p>

4. IS PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED TRAINING COST-EFFECTIVE?

The cost-effectiveness of intercultural training is properly evaluated in relation to the total cost of an individual's international assignment, which is a six-figure and, often, a seven-figure number. Variables include assignment length and whether the assignee is an executive or developmental trainee. The cost of training also varies; it depends on program duration and whether large-group training or individual/family coaching is provided.

Calculations published by the authors and others⁸ show that the direct cost of training, *as a percentage of the total cost of an expatriate assignment*, varies between **0.14%** and **1.44%**. These figures assume individual/family coaching of executives.

If group training of a large number of developmental assignees is assumed, training cost as a percentage of total cost is likely to be as low as **0.01%** (one one-hundredth of one percent).

We think these percentages are truly remarkable, given the benefits of performance-focused, research-grounded, intercultural training. We think such training is a worthwhile *investment*.

5. INTERCULTURAL TRAINING IS HEIR TO A RESEARCH TRADITION

For a complete understanding of intercultural training, one needs to know that it is grounded in a research-based social scientific tradition that had its genesis in the early 1960s, after the efforts of the first Peace Corps volunteers encountered widespread failure in the face of resistance by local nationals. The question posed by all concerned was, "Could these failures have been prevented?"

Social scientists who studied the performance problems of early Peace Corps volunteers revealed the root of the problem: *differences in values between human groups*. Their research demonstrated the practical impact of group-level behavioral differences, grounded in fundamentally different value systems.

With this knowledge, training was developed, perfected, and delivered to future Peace Corps volunteers, *whose abilities to work abroad greatly improved*.

⁸ "Cost Effective Expatriate Training: New Perspectives," *International Insight*, Summer 1996, pp. 1-3. For additional details, see the 4-page white paper by Cornelius Grove & Paul Seever, "Estimated Financial Savings from Intercultural Training," GROVEWELL, 1990. See also Robert Bean, "Australia Measuring the Value of Cross-Cultural Training," in *The Diversity Factor*, Vol. 15, No. 2 [issue title: The War for Talent], Spring 2007, pp. 1-8.

HOW INTERCULTURAL TRAINING IS DEVELOPED: For a complete understanding of intercultural training, one needs to appreciate how its content and methods are developed:

1. Interculturalists carry out social scientific research to reveal the basic assumptions, core values, and patterns of thought and emotion that characterize various human groups ("cultures").
2. As these investigations continue, analytical attention is focused on how values and other intangible factors influence behavior patterns in the daily life and work of group members.
3. Conceptual frameworks are developed for describing, and for comparing and contrasting, these factors across different cultural groups. . .in terms readily understood by laypeople.
4. Interculturalists also pay attention to the process of human adaptation that occurs (or fails to occur) when a person interacts with others *in* or *from* an unfamiliar culture.
5. Interculturalists develop methods — for example, training sequences for building awareness and skills — to help others learn, practice, and apply skills that lead to successful adaptation.
6. A trainer or coach adapts the methods generally used in their profession to fit the unique circumstances that he/she is addressing for an expatriate, a family, a multicultural team, etc.

It is because of this process, which has been occurring since the early 1960s, that we describe intercultural training as "research-based."

THE INTERCULTURAL PROFESSION: Intercultural research continues to this day. Contributing to it and its associated theory-building effort are the academic disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, communication, and social work.

As early as the mid-1970s, it was accurate to say — and it is even more accurate *today* to say — that the work of interculturalists has seven key characteristics of a professional field:

1. Hundreds of researchers and scholars, working on a salaried or entrepreneurial basis in the U.S., Europe, and other world regions, systematically gather, analyze, theorize about, and disseminate intercultural knowledge. Several of the most business-oriented scholars are based in Europe (Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Charles Hampden-Turner, etc.).
2. Dozens of fully accredited institutions of higher education in the U.S. and abroad grant masters degrees and research-based doctoral degrees in intercultural communication and related fields. Of particular note here is one of the leading institutions, the American Graduate School of International Management (widely known as "Thunderbird"), in Scottsdale, Arizona.

3. Free-standing and university-based institutes offer training and instruction in intercultural specialties. Most renowned is the 25-year-old Intercultural Communications Institute of Portland, Oregon, which houses the field's most extensive library and manages the Summer Institute of Intercultural Communication, attended by people from around the world.
4. Major publishing houses and many small presses have lists including titles on intercultural topics; dozens of new books are published annually, as they have been for three decades. For example, McGraw-Hill, Irwin Professional Publishing, Jossey-Bass, Simon & Schuster, and Butterworth Heinemann are all publishers of intercultural titles, many business-related.
5. Business-oriented periodicals and scholarly journals focus wholly or in part on intercultural knowledge and its practical application. For example, the peer-reviewed *Intercultural Journal of Intercultural Relations* has been published since the early 1970s.
6. Professional and scholarly associations, with typical member services including annual meetings drawing worldwide attendance, focus substantially on intercultural knowledge and practice. Among these are the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology and the International Academy for Intercultural Research.
7. Established consulting firms provide a wide range of intercultural services. Their services are engaged by profit-making businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and governmental agencies. Cornelius Grove & Associates, LLC, is proud to be one of these firms.

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