

Cross-Cultural Training On Values Enactment: Two Rights Could Make A Wrong

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Abstract

Potential difficulties can often arise when employee cross-cultural training includes only reference to individual value differences and no consideration to the more complex interplay of values enactment behaviors. This article reviews extant literature on such training that suggests more is needed; then, it provides practical examples of how current training methods may contribute to misunderstanding, as well as how to improve the training approach.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Training, Expatriate Training, Employee Development, Values Enactment

A Hypothetical (?) Situation

Henry had sensed things weren't going as smoothly in recent weeks. People didn't seem as enthusiastic about working with him on details of the current projects. Generally, the atmosphere around the office seemed just a little less collegial, but it was subtle and he hadn't been able to identify any specific issues. Yesterday he arranged to have coffee with a colleague and asked directly whether there was a problem he should know about.

Henry is employed by his company's headquarters in the U.S., but currently working on a 2-year expatriate assignment. Before traveling to the new location, he underwent some cross-cultural training. He was very impressed to have a training session in the host location, as well, in which he and his new colleagues reviewed differences in national culture.

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It was only a couple of hours but gave them all some awareness of areas for potential misunderstanding. Henry was pleased that the discussion often came back around to value similarities. Having talked about their national cultures in a shared meeting and, especially, with the discovery of many shared values, he felt remaining differences would be easily dealt with if or when necessary.

In the current conversation, therefore, Henry was surprised, when his colleague became very serious and tried to tactfully relay that people were questioning Henry's motives in many of his day-to-day decisions. This became a very difficult discussion as Henry pressed for specific examples that might help him understand. In spite of the examples he was still confused. His colleagues were aware that Henry's background was to be more individualistic, and he was often pressing them to be more aggressive against their competitors and more entrepreneurial. But, these are exactly the qualities they had discussed in that early training session, when they seemed to understand these values and claimed that Henry's input in this direction would be of great value on current projects. They should not be surprised by his behavior; nor should they have expected anything different. Were they not honest in the training session when these things were discussed? Henry still did not understand why negative feelings had developed.

What is at Stake?

In explaining why people in other parts of the world sometimes have negative feelings about the U.S., Sardar and Davis (2002) began by describing the past traditions of the U.S. as a such large country that it has been very self-contained, making it easy and convenient to downplay the importance if not the very existence of others. Having been the major player on most fronts, there was little felt need in the U.S. for collaboration with other nations. The resistance to treating other countries as partners in global issues created a great deal of suspicion, particularly among those dealing directly with consequences the U.S. might have helped alleviate (such as pollution). Fareed Zakaria (2008) more recently observed that "At the politico-military level, we remain in a single-superpower world.

But in every other dimension—industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural—the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance" (p. 5).

We have entered a time of economic exchange in which multinational corporations need to optimize operations across many national cultures to compete in the global arena.

In the case of Henry's experience, he believed he was in a boundary spanning position that he had prepared for and approached with sincere desire to work collaboratively with the host country personnel. Whereas he initially thought his company had made reasonable investment in his situation, he now questioned whether his training – and that of his colleagues – had been enough or even handled correctly.

Often expatriate employees (expats) become disillusioned by the parent company's support (Takeuchi, 2010). In fact some authors believe expats are "generally dissatisfied with predeparture preparation, cross-cultural training, corporate support during the international assignment, and predeparture plans for career development" (Shaffer, et al 2012, p. 1294). Now Henry is beginning to question support that he previously thought was in place. Using the categorization from Shaffer, et al, his career competencies include not only the how and why of the job tasks but also the "whom" of the work, for which he must develop a global network of associates. This latter element is now at risk.

Shaffer, et al (2012), applied a Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model to summarize extant research on expats' challenges. Overall, this approach recognizes that there are a range of work and personal demands and a given individual is subject to stress and strain reactions when resources, such as social support are not available to alleviate the pressure of demands (cf. Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). If co-workers begin to withdraw their social support, that is a reduction in resources. Further, this can become a self-reinforcing cycle in two ways. First, existing strain contributes to health problems that become an added demand (or reduced resource) ; second once the employee's perception swings to negative assumptions, that person may now find demands increasingly salient and interpret resources as further diminishing (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Takeuchi (2010) considered the host country co-workers to be stakeholders in an expat's adjustment. Based on Social Exchange Theory and the norm of reciprocity, each party contributes to further development of the relationship by offering more.

This offer is based on the expectation that the other party has intent to reciprocate. Similar to the basics of a trust cycle, this reciprocation builds as experience supports continuing belief in the others' intentions (Zand, 1972). But a break in the cycle not only lowers this belief but makes it more difficult to re-establish. Henry needs to remedy this situation quickly and hope the damage is not yet severe enough to put his working relationships, or his own adjustment possibilities, at risk.

Cross-cultural adjustment is "conceptualized as the degree of psychological comfort an expatriate has with the various aspects of a host culture" (Van Vianen, et al, 2004, p. 697) and is one of the elements of overall success, along with staying the planned length of time to complete the assignment and a superior's positive rating of task performance (e.g., Caligiuri and Tung, 1999). The expat's adjustment can be foundational to the other success indicators of remaining in country and performing as needed. What Lee and Sukoco (2010) describe as overall cultural effectiveness includes reaching task goals through successful interaction and communication with local colleagues. Further, they consider the relationship requirements of creating and sustaining ties with host country staff as a contextual performance dimension separate from the technical task performance. Among these authors, there would be general consensus that Henry's overall success will require restoring positive workplace relationships.

There are a variety of ways by which to calculate the return on investment for an expatriate assignment (McNulty and Tharenou, 2005), but authors are consistently in agreement that the costs of returning prematurely or failing to complete the assigned task should be avoided if possible due to very direct and identifiable expense. These direct costs would include relocation (of returning employee and then the replacement), identifying and/recruitment of a qualified replacement, training and preparation for that replacement, and so on. Failure to maintain a positive headquarters to subsidiary relationship is an indirect and perhaps difficult to pinpoint cost but one that is increasingly important.

As with most working situations, the personal relationships can either facilitate or obstruct project completion. Among expats assigned to provide knowledge and skills to the host country counterparts, there are reports that the problem was not lack of expertise but, rather, that the new expertise was not applied (Leach, 1994).

While some attitude change may be necessary among those facility employees, the expat's behavior – particularly in relation to the host culture values – is very important for influencing those attitudes.

Similarities and Differences Based on Traditional Expat Versus Alternative Situations

Most of the research referenced above was conducted in relation to traditional expatriate assignments – relocation of an employee to another country for a substantial period of time. In most cases, the stated purpose is transference of skills and knowledge, but it can also be for general communication from and about the goals and values of the headquarters location. Not all employees want the personal disruption of leaving their home country for long periods; some have family considerations that complicate this type of job assignment. It is also a very costly endeavor for the organization, especially factoring in the potential need for replacement of an expatriate who returns home before the scheduled time and without completing the assignment.

For all these reasons, companies have experimented with alternative situations in which to work globally without relying on traditional expatriate assignments. Shaffer, et al (2012) outlined differences primarily defined by the length of time spent outside the home country. What they term 'international business travelers' are employees who make multiple short trips to a variety of locations, each one lasting only about one to three weeks. 'Flexpatriates' are away longer – typically one to two months, tied to project assignments or specific skill transfer and problem resolution. 'Short-term assignees' are similar to flexpats but tend to have assignments of three to twelve months and may also include management responsibilities and/or management development. Each of these three variations is considered employee travel without involvement of the family. In comparison, traditional expats usually relocate their family and spend at least a full year in the host country.

Companies continue to experiment with variations. "Technology takes away the need for people to physically move and live abroad" (Tharenou, 2005, p. 476). To be more cost-efficient and less disruptive, the expatriate option is sometimes bypassed by more quickly shifting to host-country managers, use of virtual teams or simply incorporating more international work into the jobs of domestic employees (Tharenou, 2005).

The frequency and duration of travel seems to also relate to amount of stress. "the scope of global travel assignments creates physical, emotional, and intellectual stress" (p. 1292), creates instability in family relationships and friendships, and even affects the sense of self (Shaffer et al, 1012).

When considering the likelihood that an expatriates value-based behavior could be misinterpreted, there is little evidence to date of how this dynamic might differ for alternative forms of global involvement. Gertsen (1990) proposed that "attitudes are relevant only to the extent that they determine a person's actual communicative behavior in another culture" (p. 344), that behavior being a dimension of intercultural competence. Since the time of that statement, we have more people working in virtual teams and need to re-examine how the importance of communicative behavior translates into that format.

Behavior across time in face-to-face interactions is more readily observable. Would behavior be questioned from a value perspective more among people with regular interaction in which one can look for consistency, or questioned more in a relationship of short-term or virtual interaction? Would judgment of a person's intent be harsher in one situation versus the others? A one-shot incident could be considered idiosyncratic or representative. A longer exposure to personal behavior could open the door to gradual disappointment as may be the case among Henry's co-workers.

Angouri (2010) made an added point about meetings with culturally diverse attendees, saying that the corporate culture tends to override national cultures. This brings in consideration of contextual factors beyond those referenced so far, such as whether the expatriate is the main carrier of corporate culture, for example to a newly acquired host location, or simply the most recent technical expert to visit. An experienced expat might have developed skill at reading the local office culture well enough to adapt just enough but also bring in the parent company corporate culture. So, past experience of the expat is important and the assignment scope of the experience could be important.

Again, the question of how this would compare among traditional expatriation, shorter-term assignments or virtual interactions is an open question for continuing research.

In the remainder of this paper, the discussion of value enactment and subsequent interpretation is offered through one proposed training example. In truth, the utility of this model is not exclusive to working outside one's home country. Writers on cross-cultural training explain that the US has an identifiable macroculture but also microcultures "which are part of the core culture" but the "values, norms and characteristics of the mainstream (macroculture) are frequently mediated by, as well as interpreted and expressed differently within, various microcultures. These differences often lead to cultural misunderstanding, conflicts and institutionalized discrimination" (Banks and Banks, 2010, p. 7).

In other words, the intended point to be made could apply to diversity training in a U.S. setting, for example, with employees from different regions or different background but all U.S. born and raised. It would also be applicable to domestic employees who will not be engaging in global travel but have globally diverse origins. In organizations with employees engaged in international travel, the risk of difficulties interpreting value-based behavior would seem to increase. But, it is not yet clear whether to expect the scope of the assignment to be a factor, i.e. whether a longer assignment increases or decreases potential for misunderstandings.

Values Enactment – More Complex than One Clear Value at a Time

Cross-cultural training is often geared to presenting different typical values for one or more relevant national cultures, to encourage people to understand and appreciate the richness of exposure to different people. Otherwise, problems may occur with this individual having little idea of what is behind the interaction difficulties. Leach (1994) explained that the relationships among working colleagues are not linear but, rather, interdependent and complex exchanges. Failure to consider the values behind behaviors can lead to mistrust, animosities and prevailing problems in personal and task-related communications.

The complexities of cross-cultural interactions have been approached in a variety of ways. Schwartz (1999) made a distinction between culture-level and individual-level dimensions. The culture-level value dimensions define priorities that are shared; they are value statements that provide guidelines for preservation of socially approved goals. Individual values might differ, but those individual variations co-exist with shared cultural values and combine to guide behavior.

Van Vianen, et al (2004) considered the difference of surface-level diversity (easily observable differences like age and gender) compared to deep-level diversity (less apparent differences, such as values and beliefs). In their study “adjustment to interacting with host country nationals and adjustment to working in a host culture were not predicted by surface-level differences, but rather by differences in deep-level values” (p. 705).

Angouri (2010) contested the practice of using clusters of characteristics to represent national culture, saying that it implies passive enactment. “In the corporate multinational world each participant brings to the situation a matrix of identities. [Through interaction] individuals may construct themselves in a manner that articulates any number of cultural dimensions simultaneously” (Angouri, 2010, p. 210). While Angouri considers national culture as important, she positions it as a resource for each individual. This resource, combined with the matrix of identities, changes the dynamics in responding to a problem confronted at a particular moment. The defined problem and its context, in turn, will influence which dimension of identity becomes salient in that interaction.

The proposal presented here has some similarity with these in the past by continuing the theme that interaction is more complex than using one set of value statements to represent a national culture and then compare with other cultures for simple prediction of interaction quality. In the opening scenario presented here, Henry and his colleagues had undergone training handled in this simplistic manner and, yet, misunderstanding followed. Here a method is shown for initiating discussion of how within a given cultural background certain values combine differently, leading to very different potential interpretations.

For this exercise, basic values are the starting point – here values considered to be typical of people in the U.S. This set of values was built loosely around the work of McElroy (1999), who presented a number of fairly straightforward concepts and explained that “It is the *set* of beliefs in a culture that makes it complex, not the individual beliefs—all of which must be extremely simple to retain their coherence over time. Similarly, each culture is unique because of its *set* of beliefs, not because each belief in the set is unique” (p. 5). He further stated that while some beliefs might be shared by different cultures, the expression of that shared belief will not match from culture to culture.

Step A: Composing a List of Characteristic Values for Discussion

The narrative from McElroy is augmented by views of authors on the history of capitalism, such as Weber (1992), Bell (1976), and Furnham,(1990). Figure 1 provides a starting point for discussion of typical U.S. values, many originating with the situation of the first settlers to this country. In order to make a home in such wilderness they held a strong belief in hard work. Additionally, they wanted no elite class, no aristocracy such as they had left behind. Each person was expected to work hard but each was also entitled to personally benefit from that hard work. When any individual succeeded, it was an improvement for all of society, so self-reliant individualism was supported. Social rank, now to be determined through achievement, was facilitated by any use of innovation or entrepreneurial ventures that provided new wealth.

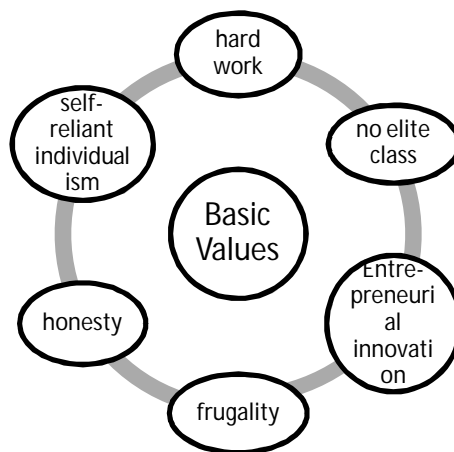


Figure 1: Six Values Considered Typical of U.S. Culture

Religious and moral beliefs proposed that happiness was tied to doing what is "right." The determination of right may have started with religious guidelines but writers such as Ben Franklin turned them into very practical business guidelines. Two strong examples are the values of honesty and frugality. By being honest in one's dealings, that reputation will create additional profit opportunities in commerce, as others will seek out business partners they trust to be honest. Frugality similarly shifted from a religious connotation to a utilitarian perspective. Rather than self-denial as a virtue in itself, being frugal came to be viewed as thriftiness that enhanced chances of success by eschewing waste.

McElroy's (1999) coverage is neither the most famous values listing nor the one used most in subsequent research. It was selected here because his approach regarding value sets is highly consistent with this example, and it has been successfully used in training situations. As will be noted later, many sources exist that could be utilized to create an initial basic values list.

Step B: Potential Misinterpretations of Combined Value Emphasis

There is a positive aspect to each value listed here but, as is usually the case, also a negative potential if the basic idea is taken too far or skewed slightly from the original concept. Following the ideas of Angouri (2010), the model now incorporates differences in salience or varying emphasis that would likely be determined by the situation and/or context. Between each pair of individual values is a speculation on how the combination of those two with could lead to behaviors that would be interpreted as something slightly different when observed by someone with their own perspective on the problem and context. In addition values applied in combination might translate to behavior very different than what we might expect by considering them only one at a time.

For example, people with strong belief in hard work plus that fact that there is no group automatically (by birthright) given elite status, could slide into patterns of establishing dominance through personal effort, believe that everyone else would or could accomplish as much if only they were willing to work as hard. Thus, observed behavior may shift away from showing much concern for whether there was truly equal opportunity.

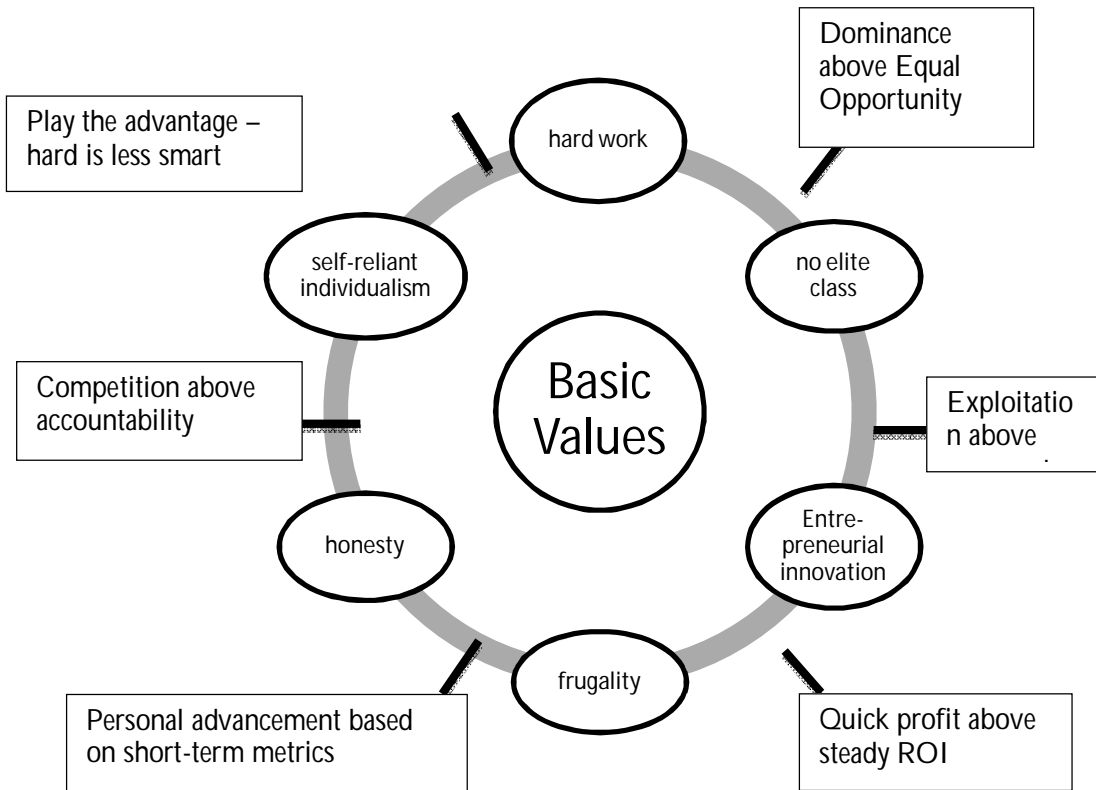


Figure 2: Points of Decision for Prioritizing Individual Values and the Potential for Negative Interpretations

Moving clockwise around the model, another combination is created. Often advancements are discussed as coming from one of two approaches – either creating something new or finding ways to more effectively exploit the resources already in place. Innovation and creativity are valued, but the return is often delayed and may carry a great deal of risk. Exploitation, such as lowering costs in business process, may have a more immediate return. One of the resources for potential exploitation in business is the human element. Because success is believed to be appropriately tied to the individual’s hard work and talents, a person who has not risen to have strong bargaining power, whose skill set is wrong for new work efficiencies, or simply lacks seniority might be readily sacrificed in the name of progress.

Although the word frugality refers to the quality of not being wasteful, people sometimes apply other synonyms like stinginess or penny-pinching.

When leadership chooses not to spend today, are they being thrifty or pinching pennies today to show good results this quarter at the expense of investment that would better serve longer-term business results? At the same time, entrepreneurial creativity – already referenced as often carrying risk, might also be focused on those ideas that make a quick return but are not very sustainable.

That same lack of investment today makes an interesting combination with honesty. By stressing short-term metrics, results can look very favorable today but with a price to be realized in the longer-term. The decision-makers, however, have often moved on to a new job by the time that price is due. That move may even have been a promotion within their own company based on success as gauged by the exact short-term metrics that ignored the accompanying future costs. Is there dishonesty involved for these individuals, if they are correctly reporting the numbers requested by their organizations? Is it dishonest to never ask the deeper question? As stated by Schwartz (1999), "Values are the vocabulary of socially approved goals used to motivate action, and to express and justify the solutions chosen" (p. 26). If society lauds personal achievement as shown through advancement such as promotion, raises and the amenities those ensure, honesty may still be an important value but subtleties of that concept could be overshadowed in daily decision-making by other value considerations. To "work the numbers" does not necessarily mean lying. Or might it be perceived to?

Similarly, the idea of competition does not require dishonesty. However, the self-reliant individualism characteristic might encourage an 'every man for himself' attitude that suggests it is perhaps wise to highlight only one's own successes while providing plausible external reasons for any shortfall. When self-reliance is heavily emphasized by competitive situations (companies competing in the marketplace, managers competing for resources, and employees competing for advancement), people might avoid accountability as a protective strategy while maintaining (although possibly subsuming) their belief in honesty.

Self-reliant individualism seems a natural fit with the belief in hard work but may become the over-emphasized value in that matching. A person may believe that hard work is good but also feel it is a sign of self-reliance to find ways to avoid personally taking on too big a share of that hard work. This can lead to playing the advantage for self rather than considering any collaboration.

A worst case scenario would be to play *any* advantage. To exploit gray areas in the law to the point of potentially unethical behaviors, to exhaust natural resources, or to devalue human life.

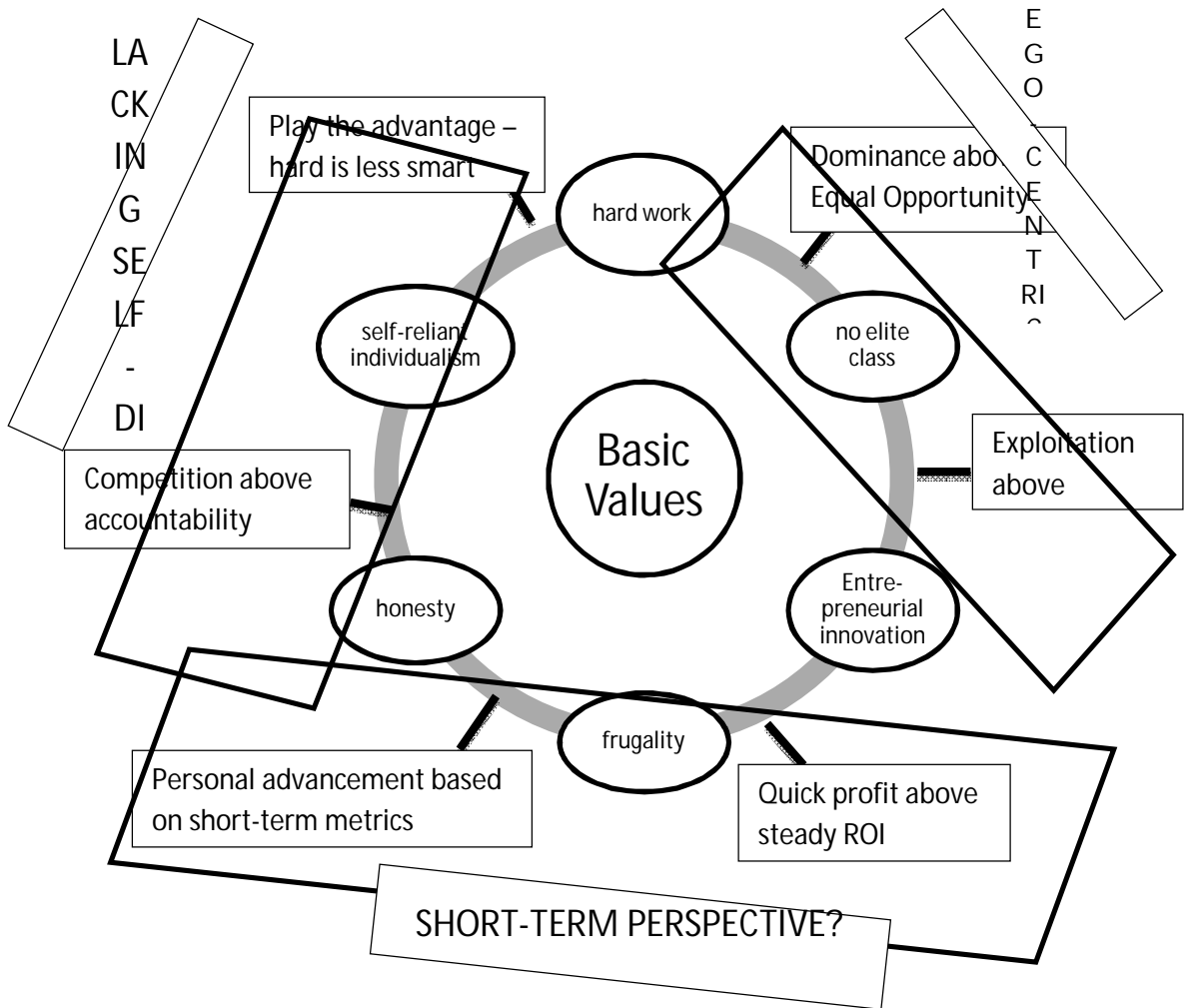


Figure 3: Layering of Possible Interpretations

Step C: Additional Layering of Unfortunate Interpretations

In the previous two steps, a working list of values was put out for consideration and then possible misinterpretations discussed due to shifting emphases among those values.

Here only two values were considered in combination but, in each case, it was not too difficult to see possible impressions created when one took precedence over the other or when each of the two were shifted just a little from the original value message into a mutually reinforcing distortion. The same person who lets competition take precedence will still profess strong belief in honesty while displaying behaviors such as dodging accountability. A manager who espouses the desire for employee creativity but will not provide research budgets may be protecting quarterly income figures with this supposed frugality but eliminating potential long term improvements. The main message here is that rarely would a single value determine a business decision. Life is more complex, so it is not only salience of a particular value that forms reaction when facing a problem. There is much to gain through more consideration of the set of values brought into play and how they interact with each other.

The final step is to consider an additional layering of interpretation. Figure 3 again takes the rather simplistic approach of combining adjacent value enactments. When behavior seems to emphasize creating dominance at the sacrifice of equal opportunity and to favor exploitation above personal creative, this might lead to a generalization that people from this culture are ego-centric. When quick profit is given more attention than steady return on investment and personal advancement is supported by use of short term metrics, it could easily suggest a prevailing short-term perspective. When competition overshadows accountability and success is linked to playing the advantage (*any* advantage?), the cultural assumption might be that people are lacking in self-discipline.

In a cross-cultural training class that focuses only on typical values, there might be discussion of characteristics such as hard work, entrepreneurial innovation, and honesty. The people from that focal culture would agree that these very positive values are indicative. People from other cultures – even when they interpret these individual elements very similarly (which is not always the case) – can develop a limited understanding of the people they will be working with through this introduction. This is the kind of training Henry and his colleagues received.

There are some problems with subtleties of the concepts when working across different cultures – true even within the same culture but the potential increases as language and personal background differences are introduced. Does frugality mean thriftiness or stinginess? Does omission of information violate a belief in honest?

Although some of this may come up during training, there is rarely any discussion of the added complexity when multiple values are incorporated into operating decisions. Henry's colleagues saw him making decisions that suggested he lacked in self-discipline and was overly focused on a short-term perspective. He looked back over his behavior and felt they should be seeing his self-reliant individualism, honesty and frugality – values they had indicated in the training session that they saw as positives.

Setting the “Dial Home Device” or How to Guide Interpretations Back to Intended Values

A popular movie, then book, then TV series followed a team of Stargate travelers in their visits to other worlds. Their vehicle for these travelers was the Stargate itself, a vertical circular passage which, when activated, created a visual disturbance once described as looking like a toilet flushing sideways. When the gate was activated, the team stepped through the circle to be transported through space via wormhole to any number of different worlds. Without creating a special setting, their arrival could be anywhere in a universe for which boundaries were unknown. But there was a navigational tool they called the “dial home device,” or DHD. The circular gate was actually a circle within a circle, both bands having cryptic symbols. As the bands turned in opposite directions the symbols would align in various combinations. When the DHD was set for the desired location the circles would rotate until achieving the correct alignment of symbols. It would then activate and the team stepped through to their intended destination.

The circular list of values has been shown so far with misalignment. Although all values with positive potential, this lack of alignment could result in behaviors that appear to others to be enactment of very different values. By only training about that initial circle, the cross-cultural interactions that follow are not likely to deliver the team to the intended performance destination. Only with more conscious navigation through value enactment opportunities will they create the needed path to shared success. Figure 4 is based on the same basic individual values but with emphasis on combined values shifted just slightly so that the more positive side of each predominates. Then the outer circle is repositioned for better alignment of symbols (observed enactments).

This creates a very different set of goals and one that seems more compatible with the initial values listing. For example, host country employees may have doubts about whether they are equally considered for higher positions. So, it may be very important that an espoused value such as not having an elite class (for example, no assumption that headquarters employees are always at the top). It is important that working behaviors demonstrate clearly that all employees have equal opportunity for success. The value on hard work can also combine with self-reliant individualism in ways that encourage creation of smarter ways to work – not to avoid work but to optimize results from the hard work. (This is very compatible with the innovation value shown across the figure.) Overall, through these more positive interpretations, the generalization can shift to a perception that achievement comes through performance.

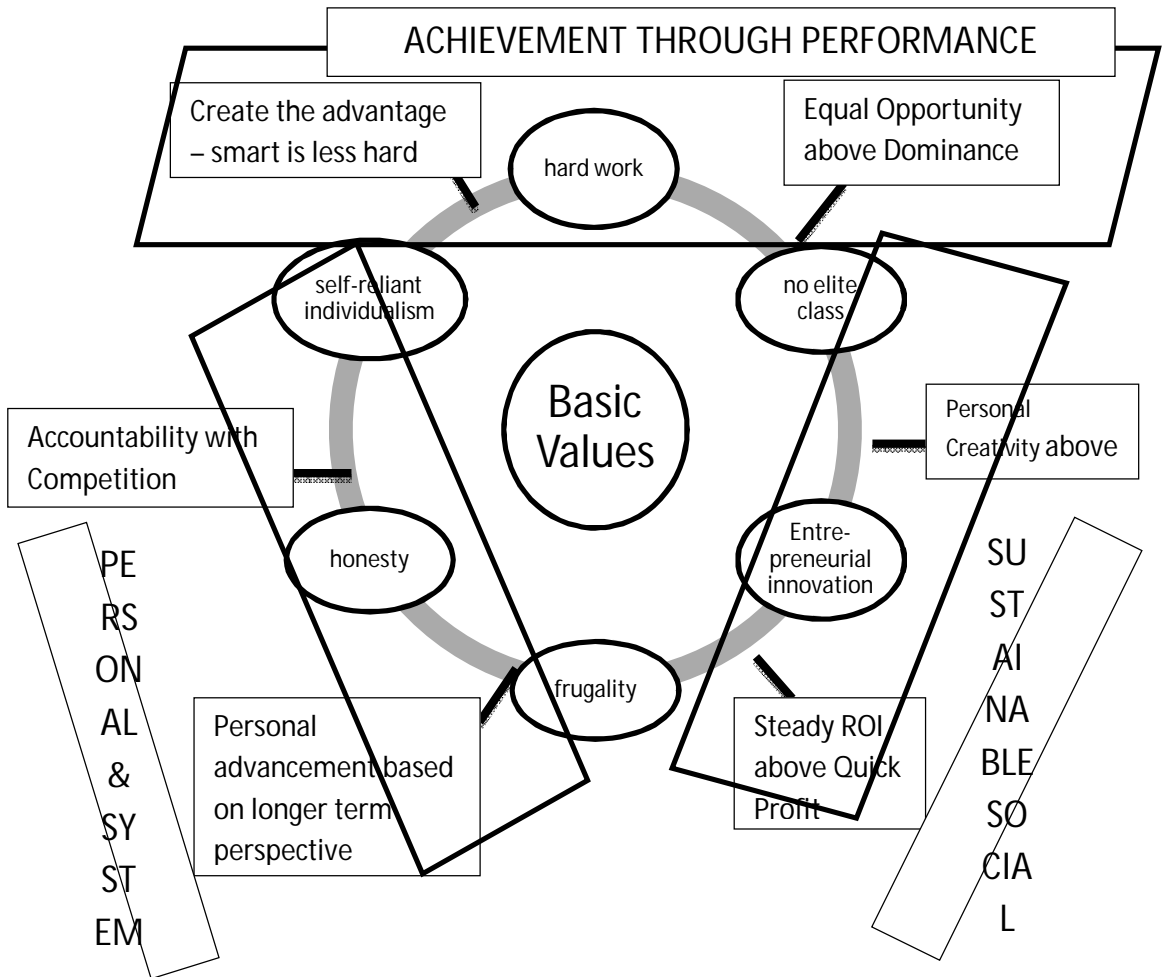


Figure 4: Shifts in Emphasis at Decision Points and Resulting Interpretations

When entrepreneurial innovation takes precedence, and there is not automatic assumption that a particular group will always hold top positions, personal creativity overshadows exploitation. As this is supported by emphasis on steady ROI – thriftiness but reasonable investment rather than quick profit by shorting current projects, the combination lays the groundwork for sustainable social capital. Creating social capital has long been considered highly important for firm-level competitive advantage (e.g., Barney, 1991). Here, the reciprocity between host country employees and expats, as described by Takeuchi (2010), has strong basis for growth going forward under these assumptions, to create and sustain the interaction among personnel that others will find difficult to duplicate – a sustainable competitive advantage.

When there is high expectation for accountability within competitive situations and personal advancement is linked to a longer term perspective, the values of self-reliant individualism, honesty and frugality are being integrated into a general perception of personal and system integrity.

Avoiding Henry's Brush with Expatriate Failure

Henry's story has been used throughout as a brief reference from which to point out the difficulties created when an expat manager who believes he is acting within the expected value system faces negative reactions from host country employees. Henry did not fail in his assignment. What saved him was having colleagues who were able and willing to help him reveal the root difficulty when he sought that feedback. As highlighted by Lee and Sukoco (2010) the communicational aspect of cultural effectiveness has two important foundations. One is the personal willingness to participate in conversations with co-workers that have to do with misunderstandings of this type. The other is having the ability to do so which requires communication skills but also the existence of supporting interpersonal relationships that enable the discussion.

As emphasized in discussion of the model presented here, cross-cultural exchanges are complicated not only by differences in interpretation of the problem and context but also the individual's choice of which values are emphasized based on that interpretation. And it should be recognized that the some combinations of particular value choices might create misunderstanding.

Two positive values can combine to create an unintended impression and those impressions can combine to a negative generalization. Two rights can make a wrong. However, the expat who retains faith in the basic values and intent may not easily see the progressive interpretations that are causing the problem.

A number of authors have emphasized that customized training, particularly training that stresses self-knowledge, is more helpful to expats' adjustment. According to Gertsen (1990), "knowledge of one's own culture is a good point of departure" (p.357), and all expatriate training should have the goal of teaching employees how to adjust their behavior in order to communicate effectively without renouncing their own cultural background. In the model presented here, the subtleties of meanings among specific values and in various combinations can help people within that culture better understand their own actions in connection with values held. Gertsen (1990) stresses that communicative behavior is not something best approached in generalities. A specific model of information for discussion, therefore, might be extremely helpful in training situations.

Angouri (2010) warned about the perpetuation of stereotypes when training is restricted to listings of ethnic traits, suggesting a more dynamic approach. Lee and Sukoco (2010) also emphasized that the behavioral aspect of cultural intelligence is a step beyond simply knowing about cultural differences and wanting to act appropriately. Intercultural sensitivity, as summarized by Perry and Southwell (2011) involves both the motivation to understand differences and the actual experience of cultural differences which is partially a construction of the individual. Effective cross-cultural communication therefore requires cultural self-awareness.

Contribution Summary

McNulty and Tharenou (2005) consolidated written sources to conclude that "scholars have suggested that training and development programs that are customized according to an expatriate's past international experience, the assignment's objectives, the intended location and the needs of the relocating family, are likely to be more effective than generic training and development programs" (p. 82). Adding in Angouri's (2010) observation that corporate culture overrides national differences in meetings, there is a wide range of considerations when trying to customize training content.

Further complicating the training design are process considerations that should include core adult learning principles, known as andragogy, which take into consideration learners need to know, self-concept, prior experience and motivation.

Rarely are materials or methods openly offered to help meet all of these suggestions, as researchers tend to focus on the reasoning for what needs to be done and the resulting impact, rather than the practical implementation. Here a discussion process is offered. Much customization is needed but, as a process tool, that customization in itself can comprise training content. This process-oriented approaches targets the deeper exploration of values in practice (Auster and Freeman, 2013; Gehman, Trevino and Garud, 2013), as well as supporting the recommendations of authors already mentioned who specialize in cross-cultural research. The following comments address utilizing this process, with particular attention to the possibility of shared training sessions where one culture is the focus that day for discussion but the conversation includes representation from others.

Step A, as shown in building the model offered here, is the inner circle of key values identified for a specific national culture. One stage of training would be selection of the top values, using a total number constraint that fits with the time allowed for total training. This can be facilitated by providing lists from which to choose or prioritize. Important discussion might arise about basic values in contrast to observed enactments that are developed as step B. In this way the two steps are not entirely separated but, rather, an evolving portion of the discussion. However, a list from which to select can help keep the focus on basic values. As participants work with the positive and negative potential of observed enactments, they move through step B and into step C, and may develop a wide variety of generalizations for discussion.

Different training groups may develop different listings of the top values, and the trainer should be prepared to comment on how this selection of 4 or 5 values corresponds to commonly identified culture traits from research. Some refinement might be in order but generally what the group identifies will have strong overlap with extant research and any differences are good for discussion. Certainly, in utilizing a list of basic values, the sequence for placing them around a circle is another discussion. Even in the example shown here, this aspect could be changed any number of ways and still facilitate good discussion points.

Training breakout groups could be asked to address several 'pairings' of values without devoting time to a total group consensus about placement around a circle. If a circle evolves as those conversations are consolidated, that's a unique plus. Working in a circle helped with this example but should not be a requirement to the point it would take time and energy away from more fruitful discussion of the values and enactments.

After breakout groups have reported back on their discussion of how particular pairings might lead to positive or negative interpretations, the total group can move into step C to briefly consider broader generalization and comparison to existing stereotypes. People from the focal culture may then begin to realize how stereotypes held by others have a foundation in their basic values. They also may begin to see that small shifts in their behaviors as they enact these values can impact others' interpretation. The best outcome is similar to Gersten's (1990) reference advice to maintain the original value but learn communicative behavior that enacts that value in ways that are compatible with the host country values.

For the training participants that are not in the culture used as focus in this session, this approach may help them learn to separate enactment behaviors, which are subject to interpretation, from the basic values. When they can appreciate that the expat's intent is not always expressed optimally, they may have increased willingness for the conversations in which to address difficulties that arise.

This brief example will not solve all the difficulties of cross-cultural training. It is offered as one tool for discussion. Henry's company was ahead of many in that they offered training in which the expat and the host country colleagues participated jointly, and this may have set the stage for his recovery from problems of misunderstanding. The contribution hoped for here was to take the information offered by researchers on expatriates and assemble a practical suggestion that utilized that accumulation of knowledge.

Returning to earlier comments on variations of global working assignments, this type of approach would be useful to any diversity training that included value-enactment differences. It could be constructed to address gender, age or ethnic groups within one national cultural. However, the growing exchange of knowledge and working activities across national cultures increases the need for better training in those areas.

Certainly, this general approach could also include family members who have to interact with the culture changes, as well. In general wording here, the approach was typically referenced in terms of headquarters employees taking on expatriate assignments to a subsidiary location but, of course assignments in the other direction are equally important and need the same benefit of understanding their own and others' cultures before taking on that responsibility.

Longer opportunities for face-to-face exposure, such as traditional expatriate assignments, offer more time for resolving differences. However, they also offer longer opportunities for problems to magnify if misunderstandings start and they are not openly discussed for resolution. The shorter term assignments may lessen opportunity to resolve misunderstandings. On the other hand, people may let specific incidents slide by with less reaction, rationalizing that an isolated incident might just be a personality idiosyncrasy or that there is not time to give it much concern. Yet, those individual incidents might build to general feelings of uneasiness between the two locations that manifest in sub-optimal results over time. To the extent that employees involved in short term assignments don't have the same opportunity for feedback on how their behaviors are creating positive or negative interpretations, it seems to indicate at least as much need for training as that given to traditional expatriates.

The focus here has been on practical application supported by researchers' identification of needs. However, as with any training process, data on effectiveness would be vital. Future research could follow this in many directions. One strong research opportunity would be research on comparative benefit gained across variations in scope of the expatriate assignment – traditional, shorter term, or virtual interactions.

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