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INTERCULTURAL SENSITIZERS AS CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING METHOD

This article is an introduction to the use of a cross-cultural training method known as Intercultural Sensitizer or Culture Assimilator training.. This training method can be used with volunteers and/or Internationals; in a group setting or as reading material. This training uses critical incident exercises, i.e short vignettes that cross-cultural misunderstandings that are rooted in differences in values/attitudes/ beliefs between cultures, or conflicts that are rooted in the experience of culture shock. These reasons/roots for cross-cultural conflicts can be grouped in three broad categories: emotional processes (emotions caused by culture shock), knowledge areas (specific cultural differences), and differences in processing information (meta-cognitive processes; how people think about the world; the paradigms they use to look at reality). An awareness of these categories will provide a framework for analyzing and solving cross-cultural misunderstandings and will serve as a tool for an ongoing exploration of cultural differences.

Who will benefit from Intercultural Sensitizers

Anyone who interacts with members of other cultures can benefit from this cross-cultural training method because it will sensitize the trainee to broad (general) cultural differences. In other words, trainees will develop a framework for identifying and analyzing a wide variety of cultural differences and sources for cultural misunderstandings, and will be better equipped to solve potential cultural conflicts. In addition, people will develop confidence in interacting with others and learn to appreciate differences rather than be threatened by them.

The training method has been successfully used with business men, American exchange students, and peace corps volunteers preparing for assignments overseas, International students in the U.S. and in settings that involves the interaction and collaboration between members of different cultures.

ISM staff can use this training method for American volunteers and/or internationals; in a homogeneous group or with mixed groups (representatives from various cultures).

Intercultural Sensitizers - a defintion

What are Intercultural Sensitizers? How are they different from case studies, critical incidents or culture assimilators? The terms culture assimilators and intercultural sensitizers are used synonymously, as NAME FOR A CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING METHOD. In this type of cross-cultural training, critical incidents are used to illustrate cultural differences and possible points of conflich and misunderstanding among people from differing cultures. CRITICAL INCIDENTS are short stories that describe the interaction between two or more people from different cultures. In the stories something happens that leads to a misunderstanding. The reader is given four to five possible explanations (or rationales) for what's going on to chose from. For each possible choice a feedback paragraph is provided that provides further information and explanation as to what the cultural issue in the story is. Most cross-cultural misunderstandings stem from the different ways in which people evaluate a given situation or behavior. These ways of evaluating a situation are called attributions. Attributions are subjective perceptions that are based on one's culture background and experience. What is deemed rude in one culture (sneezing without an apology) might be perfectly acceptable in an other one. What is perceived as awkward by some (extended silence in a

conversation) might appear perfectly normal for a person from a different cultural background. But the human tendency is to evaluate a situation not only according to one own's set of values but also to declare different behavior to be 'bad,' 'inferior' or even 'malicious.' Critical incidents are designed to help people identify the attributions they make and also to think about attributions people from other culture might possibly make. Trainees thus learn to step outside of the framework of their own cultural assumptions and analyze a situation from a more neutral point of view. They also learn to ask the question "What is going on" rather than "Who is right or wrong."

There are two types of critical incidents: culture-general and culture-specific incidents. The former would describe a situation in general terms such as 'a south-east Asian country,' a 'Southern university', or 'a large city in the Western Europe';   while the latter would use descriptions like 'SiewEng, a girl from Singapore,' 'Thomas, a freshman at OleMiss,' and 'Paris, France.'

Depending on the training setting either type of critical incidents can be used or the two can be mixed. In a training that prepares ISM volunteers to reach out to Mainland Chinese students, it would be preferable to use culture-SPECIFIC incidents, because research has shown that trainees before culture-specific incidents (they appear more vivid don't leave the question open: "which south-east Asian country?", etc.). In a seminar for volunteers working with students from a variety of cultures, however, it would be beneficial to use culture-GENERAL incidents, to ensure that trainees don't assume that a given incident ONLY applies for that specific setting but the underlying principles can be transferred to a variety of cultures.

Underlying cross-cultural themes

The broad cultural topics that form the framework for critical incidents can be divided into three overarching areas. These areas include cross-cultural issues that result from the adverse emotions of culture shock (the affective domain); misunderstandings that stem from the different ways in which people of various cultures perceive and process their environment (cognitive processes), and potential conflicts that flow from specific cultural differences (knowledge areas). Each one of these areas will influence how successful a person will be in functioning within a foreign cultural setting (either as sojourner in a different country, or in interactions with foreigners in one's home country). The extent to which negative feelings of culture shock affect a person can vary greatly according to a persons personality, emotional maturity and stability. (this first area of course, would mainly affect the international students we seek to reach, not our ISM volunteers. But it will be helpful for our volunteers to learn about this area to understand the Internationals better). The influence of the second area is most elusive, because cognitive processes are rarely reflected upon and form the 'connective tissue' for a person's life and world view. It is in this area, that people often feel "How could they?" or "What's making them tick?" Finally, the third area of specific cultural differences, is the most obvious one, can be source for a lot of annoyance and frustration but can be dealt with quite easily through learning more about. But this area can also be the most 'fun' because as volunteers and Internationals get to know each other they enjoy learning 'tidbits' about an other culture and new (exotic) ways of doing things.

I. THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN: - emotions people experience in cross-cultural settings

anxiety - unfamiliar situations create insecurity and anxiety over whether one's behavior is
      acceptable/appropriate.

disconfirmed expectations - expectations about how certain things should be or work are being
      frustrated and negative reactions might be disproportionate to the triggering situation

belonging - the sense of being an outsider; loss of social connectedness/network

ambiguity - 'signals' (i.e. certain behaviors) can have meanings that are different from one's

native culture (laughing can be a sign that something is funny OR that someone is

embarrassed; language difficulties can cause people to understand only part of a message)

confrontation with personal prejudices - interacting in a foreign culture can heighten ethnocentric

attitudes but also question previously held prejudices about certain groups of people

II. KNOWLEDGE AREAS - unconscious assumptions, values and beliefs people have grown up

with and don't question:

task vs people orientation - how much time is spent working vs. Socializing; doing vs. being;

time and space - how late is too late, what does punctuality mean; how close is too close;

personal space; privacy; focus on past, present, future time; touching and expression of

emotion.

language - learning a foreign language (intonation, pronunciation, colloquialisms, slang, etc.) and

non-verbal communication

roles - what are expected and socially accepted behaviors for a situation/set of relationship

(parent-child, husband/wife, teacher-student, man/woman, older/younger person,

boss/employee)

individualism vs. Collectivism - how do individuals identify themselves, do they see themselves

as part of a family/social group or an independent agent; how are decisions being made;

when is it O.K. to pursue one's individual's interest, when is it considered selfishness;

how are peers and acquaintances chosen; independence/dependence/interdependence

rituals and superstitions - rituals to mark transitions: becoming of age, death, marriage, birth, etc.

These are usually based on religious (or quasi religious) beliefs

hierarchies - high and low status; classes, power distance; formal vs non formal interaction

values - what is good/evil, beautiful/ugly, right/wrong, appropriate, admirable, etc.; views of

human nature (good/bad/neither; changeable/fixed; how to view and deal with nature

(subjugation, harmony, mastery); masculinity (achievement, advancement, earnings) vs.

Femininity (beauty, quality of life, service)

III. COGNITIVE PROCESSES - Basic concepts that deal with the thought processes and

paradigms, people use to look at the world and give meaning/order to it:

categorization - people organize stimuli/perceptions into categories, these categories can vary

across cultures, therefore the same behavior/situation might be interpreted in different

ways

differentiation - nuances within categories can vary across cultures; things that are of greater

importance to a culture will be differentiated with greater detail; e.g. Eskimos have

numerous words for snow

In group vs. Out group distinction - who are the people with whom one can relax and share; who

is kept at a distance; what rules apply within each group; definition of who is friend,

acquaintance, foe and how to act towards them; realization that there are certain groups

within a host culture from which one will always be excluded.

learning styles - predominant learning style in a given culture: lecture, discussion, focus on

group processes, individual discovery, etc.

attributions - people observe the behavior of others and reflect on it and their own behavior.

Judgments about the causes of a given behavior a called attributions. This concept is

foundational for intercultural sensitizers: each critical incident gives four (occasionally

three or five) alternative interpretations (or attributions) for a cross-cultural

misunderstanding that will help the reader to see the situation from a different perspective

and make isomorphic attributions (i.e a judgment about the situation that is shared or

agreed upon by others as opposed to simply subjective)

How to set up a training using the culture assimilator

A typical training uses 20 or more critical incidents to provide ample opportunity to

reflect on cultural differences. These 20 or so incidents should be divided among 4-5 themes that

seem to be particularly relevant for the needs of the trainees. There are several collections of

culture-general and specific incidents that can be used as a resource (see bibliography). Of

course, all of these materials have been developed for secular settings and might have to be

modified for ISM purposes.

The advantage of using culture assimilator training is, that the trainer doesn't have to be

an expert in cross-cultural studies. The incidents stimulate discussion and the rationales and

feedback that are given for each incident provide valuable background information. Unlike case

studies, critical incidents not only describe the conflict but also offer an explanation.

Ideally, the trainer has a number of people who have undergone cross-cultural training in the past

and can join small groups as facilitators in the discussion. Internationals who have successfully

adjusted to American culture are good choices for facilitators because they have undergone 'real

life' training. The facilitators (and the trainer's) role in this type of cross-cultural training is that

of a moderator or host. To receive the full benefit of the training, it is essential to let trainees

grapple with the issues and engage in lively discussion. The goal is NOT to find the right answers to the incidents but to analyze what is going on and to gain insight into the inner processes of the players in the story. Therefore, trainers and facilitators should guide by asking questions not necessarily giving answers or information.

Training can be considered successful, when people engage in the discussions and express interest, surprise or excitement. A single training session won't turn people into cross-cultural experts, but it can open their eyes to the multitude of cultural differences and instill curiosity and respect for others. Becoming a life-long learner and adopting the attitude of 'not wrong just different' (we're NOT talking cultural relativism; in fact most SERIOUS cultural trainers admit there ARE cultural absolute, though they are at a loss as to how to determine them).The best thing that can happen during a training is that people start to ASK QUESTIONS and develop an interest in finding out more, they become cultural sleuths, so to say. And once people ask questions they move away from the need to be correct at all times and to have all the answers, and begin to learn from and with others. And, as mentioned above, as people develop greater confidence in interacting within a cultural setting different from their own, the can relax and appreciate the differences rather than feel tense or even defensive.

Cautions

Intercultural sensitizers are based on behaviors and attributions that are representative for a certain culture. However the reader (facilitator, volunteer and/or student) needs to bear in mind that there are considerable individual differences between members of the same culture. While for example it is true, that Koreans tend to be more collectivistic and Americans tend to be more individualistic; there are Koreans that are less collectivistic than the average, and Americans who

are less individualistic. Readers need to think in dominant cultural patterns, not stereotypes. It is helpful to picture cultural differences on a continuum: (in this case, K representing Koreans, A Americans) that illustrates that there might be members from one cultures that are more like members of another culture in regards to a given behavior.

KKKK KKKK A   AAAA   AAAA

　　KKKKA　　　　　K　　　　KA　　　　　A　　K　　　　K AAAA

_____

Collectivistic   Individualistic
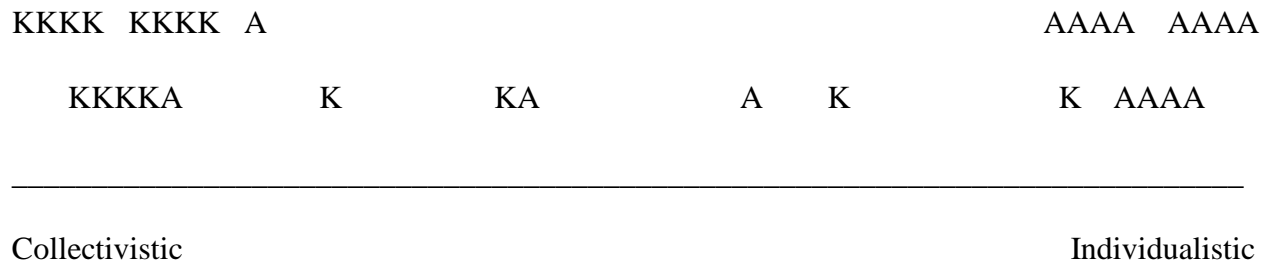
It is also important to use multiple critical incidents for a given theme to sensitize the readers to the nuances in behavior. Readers should be cautioned to think that once the have learned about a certain cultural distinction 'they have it all figured out.' The goal of intercultural sensitizers is to give the trainees a taste of the differences and to equip them with a mindset that asks: "I wonder how culture X interprets this situation."

Sample Schedule for Intercultural Sensitizer Training

Below is a suggestion for how to design a one-day cross-cultural training day. If more time is available, more cultural themes can be addresses, if less time, fewer. It is important however to spend an adequate amount of time on introducing the different cultural themes (to give trainees a feel for the complexity of cross-cultural interactions) and to spend sufficient time on debriefing (emphasizing that the training has been the START not completion of the cross-cultural training)

9:00 - 10:00 Breakfast, Welcome & Introductions
Create an informal atmosphere that will promote interaction and sharing, start out with something to eat and give an opportunity for people to introduce themselves (their interest in cross-cultural training)

10:00 - 11:15 Purpose of training and sample of a critical incident exercise (CIE)
- Emphasize that the training is designed to give them tools to analyze cross-cultural behavior/misunderstanding;
- do a sample CIE with the whole group (that way you do something hands-on and people won't drown in theory; you may want to pick a humorous incident to break the ice and keep the training from feeling 'too heavy') -;
- introduce the concept of attributions;
- give an overview of the three broad cultural themes and which ones the training will focus on (for example individualism vs. Collectivism; in-group vs out-group behavior; and roles, status and hierarchies)

11:15 - 11:30 Break

11:30 - 12:30 Critical Incidents for the first theme in small groups
- Break up in groups of four (not more than five including a facilitator) and work on 4-5 incidents. If you use facilitators, instruct them to emphasize the goal is to DISCUSS an incident from various points of view and decide which explanation seems to explain the situation best - rather than finding the right answer as quickly as possible. Therefore participants should read and discuss ALL of the explanations before they read the feedback paragraphs and pick an answer.
- Have groups summarize what they learned; what incidents created the most discussion; which ones were most helpful, annoying, incredible, etc...

12:30 - 1:30 Lunch

1:30 - 2:30 Topic #2

2:30 - 2:45 Break
These breaks are a good transition for the next topic and or for groups to wrap up their discussion

2:45 - 3:45 Topic #3

3:45 - 4:00 Break

4:00 - 5:00 Questions, Debriefing, Sharing, Evaluation
- Emphasize that this training is just the beginning of discovering cultural differences, but that participants now have the concepts (cultural themes, attributions) and tools to analyze future cross-cultural situations. Highlight the need to be a learner (vs. Having all

the answers), the fact that volunteers and Internationals learn from one another, and God's fingerprints in each culture. Encourage folks to be ambassadors of Christ first, to guard against cultural paternalism and to be patient when confronted with other's ethnocentric attitudes (Americans and Internationals are equally prone to think their country is the best).
- Give participants an opportunity to share what they have learned and encourage them to discuss some of the incidents with their cross-cultural friends to get their feed-back and encourage sharing about cultural differences.
- Ask for feedback as to what has been helpful and what can be changes.
- If time allows ask participants to share their own cross-cultural incidents as material for new CIEs.

How to develop new critical incidents

Developing one own's critical incidents is not very complicated though somewhat time-consuming because it requires a team effort. There first step is to identify a group of people with cross-cultural experience (Americans, Internationals - people who lived overseas for more than 3 months; other ISM staff who have extensive experience in cross-cultural interactions, etc.) Who are willing to cooperate in the process. Usually a team of no more than five people works best. Secondly, each member of the group simply records 10-12 cross-cultural misunderstandings that they either have personally witnessed, or that somebody has told them about. After recording the incidents, each member should develop four rationales per incidents as possible explanations for the misunderstanding. Developing credible and not too obvious rationales and feed-back paragraphs is the most difficult step in the process. It is also at this point, where the other members of the group can give constructive criticism and editorial assistance by reading and critiquing another members incidents and rationales. Ideally each incident should be critiqued by another member of the group (A reads B's, B reads C's incidents, etc.) and then the entire group should meet and go through the incidents one by one for additional changes. It is also extremely helpful to ask an International whose culture is representing in an incident for feedback to make

get a feel for whether the cultural pattern described is REPRESENTATIVE for the culture or just an isolated incident due to the individual characteristics of the people involved. Feedback from Internationals and or bi-cultural individuals (people at home in their native and U.S. culture) is one of the best ways to ensure that the incidents are convincing. It is to be expected that in the process of writing and rewriting incidents several will be weeded out so that only the most useful ones remain. A last step in the process is to determine the cross-cultural theme(s) each of the incidents illustrates (power distance, individualism, language, etc.) Again, this is best be done via a group consensus of the team that developed the incidents and with input from Internationals who are familiar with the cross-cultural themes outlined in an earlier paragraph. Some of the best incidents (those that stimulate most discussion) are often the most complex and cannot be easily assigned to a single cross-cultural theme but rather covers multiple areas. This is not a problem because the goal of intercultural sensitizer training is not to academically dissect a situation but to develop an understanding and appreciation for the many nuances and possibilities of cultural differences.

Resources

1. General books on cross-cultural training

S. Fowler, & M. Mumford (Eds.) (1995) Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-cultural Training Methods, (Vol.1) Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, P.O. Box 700 Yarmouth, Maine 04096 - articles on different types of cross-cultural training tools, how to use them and resources for materials.

Landis, D., & Bhagat, R. (Eds.) (1996) Handbook of Intercultural Training. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. Email: order@sagepub.com - at times tedious reading but great articles by various authors about cultural values, training methods, academic and practical issues.

2. Sources for Intercultural Sensitizer Training and CIEs

Brislin R., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C., & Yong, M. (1986) <u>Intercultural Interactions: A practical Guide</u>. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. Email: order@sagepub.com - Collection of CIEs covering all cross-cultural themes; helpful introductory chapter on use and construction of CIEs

Kempt H. (1999) <u>Culture Assimilator Training for Students with Limited English Proficiency</u>. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Mississippi.. Ann Arbor, MI :UMI Dissertation Services. www.Bellhowell.Inforlearning.com - Collection of easy English CIEs, assessment of the special adjustment needs of International students with limited English proficiency

Landis Dan. (1994) <u>The Intercultural Sensitizer </u>. Oxford, MS: D.K. Research and Consultation Group, P.O. Box 1074, Oxford, MS 38655. A collection of critical incidents for Caucasians and African Americans, and for Americans and Internationals at Southern Colleges and Universities. These critical incidents are available in printed or in electronic (interactive) form from the address above.

Wang M., Brislin R., Wang W., Williams D., and Chao J. (2000) <u>Turning Bricks into Jade</u>. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, interculturalpress.com. Great collection for use with Chinese, divided into three arenas: work, school and home; helpful chapter on construction of CIEs and on central/specific cultural issues pertinent to Chinese culture

For additional resources about specific cross-cultural topics and/or questions, please contact the author of this article: Heidi Kempt-Chew, 3316 Dellwood Rd., Cleveland Hts., OH 44118, email: chew_crew@yahoo.com