

Sample pages from the Coaching Manual

COMPETENCY 2: FLEXIBILITY

I. Flexible behaviour

Rationale for Development

Globalisation of business has certainly made the world a smaller place in terms of distance, language and information. It has even created a shared illusion of convergence in terms of behaviour – the rituals we participate in, the business jargon we share, the demands of the communication technology that connects us. However, research clearly shows that underlying differences in national cultural values (such as our preferred approach to communication, our attitude to hierarchy and our response to time) have remained strong. These differences in values impact on our behaviours, and how we interpret practices that we are supposed to share with our international counterparts. If we all agree that a 'meeting' needs 'chairing' and an 'agenda' needs following, there are still some very difficult issues to resolve around behaviour at an international level – who does the chairing and on what grounds? what constitutes an agenda, and how do we follow it? What's the purpose of a meeting and who participates?

In a global context where such diversity is encountered regularly by professionals of all kinds, 'flexible behaviour' is a key competency. It becomes even more critical when we need to put a foreign client at ease, show respect for the practices in a foreign subsidiary or adapt to the approaches of a new boss. As culture is in itself invisible, and our own preferred behaviour is often unconscious, it is particularly hard to identify the areas where we need to broaden our responses. However, like first learning to drive, once we have identified what to do, and made the first somewhat self-conscious and awkward first attempts, confidence and competence quickly comes with practice.

Action steps

1. Ask some colleagues about how flexible they think you are in the following contexts:
 - a) Selecting modes of communication – email, telephone, face-to-face?
 - b) Your style of communication – direct/indirect, task oriented/relationship oriented, formal/informal, neutral/emotional?
 - c) Your approach to communication events – running meetings, giving presentations, negotiating?
 - d) Your approach to managing people – giving feedback, building relationships, handling conflict, making decisions
 - e) Your approach to working in teams – reporting progress, allocating responsibilities, meeting deadlines etc.
2. Take one or two of these contexts where your colleagues see you as less flexible. Ask for feedback as to how your colleagues see your typical behaviour in a mono-cultural or familiar professional context? How do you, for example, normally prefer to run meetings?
3. Read some literature on how different cultures respond to these management and communication contexts (see 'International Management' by Richard Mead). Observe the way your international partners may approach things differently from you. Identify some new behaviours that might be useful in your target cultural setting.
4. Reflect on some international relationships you are involved in now, or have been involved in the past. How could you adapt your behaviour to build trust with your partners?
5. Decide which of your behaviours you are not willing to adapt, as you feel it will compromise your personal effectiveness.
6. Reflect on competencies where you have scored highly and which may support you. 'Cultural knowledge', 'listening' and 'perceptiveness' will all help indicate where, when, and how you need to adapt your behaviour.

COMPETENCY 8: CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

II. Valuing differences

Rationale for development

An increasing number of professionals working in an international context are convinced about the business case for valuing differences – recruiting and retaining the best people, added value partnerships, improved customer service and greater creativity. However, as Percy Barnevik, ex-CEO of ABB (one of the world's most successful companies) said about global managers 'This is not a natural process. We are herd animals. We like people who are like us' (see Ghoshal, S & Bartlett, C.A. 1992. *Transnational Management: Text, Cases and Readings in Cross-border Management*). It seems that our communication with people from another cultural group is usually based on negative expectations and leads to anxiety.

Barnevik goes on to suggest that in global companies 'You encourage people to work in multi-national teams. You force them to create personal alliances across borders'. However, without a motivation at a personal level to 'value differences', whether born out of professional experience, personal background or sense of personal values, such social engineering is doomed to failure. To value differences it is not enough to seek out collaboration with colleagues and partners from diverse backgrounds. You also need to explore the differences between you, understand the logic of doing things differently, and then communicate respect for how the other side sees the world. The following actions will help in this process.

Action Steps

1. Read the cultural value models (Hofstede and Trompenaars) which reveal how different cultures manage the same problems in different ways. Look for the logic that underlies approaches that you feel uncomfortable with eg. a 'high power distance' between subordinates and bosses
2. Reflect on areas where working across cultures, and valuing the differences that have revealed themselves, may have benefited your company from a business perspective.
3. Take the opportunity to get to know colleagues from different cultural groups on a personal level. Explore and understand the different things that motivate and interest them. Learn the benefits of doing things another way and the skills they will have needed to acquire to operate effectively in their home environment. Relate your learning to the value models.
4. Reflect on any relationships you have with international partners which have not gone well. To what degree could there be a cultural element underlying the problems you experienced.
5. Draw on those competencies and their associated dimensions where you have scored highly and that may support you in 'valuing differences'. 'Welcoming strangers' will help you to initiate contact with new international partners while 'acceptance' (a dimension of 'openness') will make you more open to diverse and often conflicting views and perspectives. 'Information gathering' (a dimension of 'cultural knowledge') will help you understand the logic of these views and perspectives, while 'transparency' and 'rapport' (a dimension of 'influencing') will help you communicate respect and build trust.

COMPETENCY 10: SYNERGY

I. Creating new alternatives

Rationale for Development

When working internationally in a business context, colleagues and business partners may well have different approaches to issues, different ideas about how things should be done and different solutions to common problems. They will start from different value sets, and have different criteria for weighing up issues and possible solutions. They may also have different assumptions about who should make the decisions and how. Of course, all these differences can also arise in a mono-cultural setting, but a shared culture usually means that the differences will be less, and that there will be common assumptions about how the differences should be resolved. This is unlikely to be the case in a culturally diverse group.

When people from a number of different nationalities are working together therefore, these differences can impede or even bring to a halt progress within a work group. Perhaps because of this, practice suggests that many peoples' experience of working in an international team is difficult and frustrating, instead of being as productive and rewarding as they had hoped and expected.

Sometimes these differences can be overcome by one person, or a national sub group, imposing their own ways and ideas, but this can lead to others opting out, losing motivation, and not contributing what they have to offer. Certainly the potential for using the diverse resources of the group to find creative solutions to problems will be lost.

An important skill, therefore, for international executives, is the ability to overcome these differences in a way that harnesses all the knowledge, skills and ideas of the people involved. They need to be able to release the energy and creativity of all concerned; to help teams to find ways of working together that transcend different national approaches; and to design new solutions that build on and integrate the best ideas wherever they may come from.

To do this requires good facilitation skills and sensitivity to cultural differences. But in an international context it also requires the ability to accept and work with apparently contradictory ideas. People, groups and organisations as well as national cultures grow and develop through the reconciliation of opposite endowments. Not only encouraging and rewarding individual performance, but also building shared responsibility and team spirit; not only working for low cost services but also enhancing their premium and quality characteristics; not only seeking the economies of mass production but also tailoring products to local markets.

Action Steps

1. When working in a team, get to know all the team members as individuals, understanding to what extent they are 'cultural marginals' or 'normal' within their own national/regional context on a range of cultural dimensions. This will help you to avoid labelling them with a national stereotype.
2. If you can influence the composition of an international work team, ensure that there is a good balance so that no one cultural group is likely to dominate proceedings.
3. Brush up on general facilitation skills by attending a good workshop where you can practise in a protected environment.
4. After meetings where a number of different cultures are represented, take time to analyse and record the impact that cultural differences had on the interactions that took place. Use this to structure and manage the interactions at future meetings.

5. Early in the life of any new team, surface assumptions and initiate discussions about mutual expectations concerning such issues as:
 - What is the role of the leader?
 - What is the role of other team members?
 - How will important decisions be taken?
 - How should conflicts be resolved?
 - What is the balance for each team member of accountability to the group and accountability to others outside the group?
 - What methods can be used to ensure that all team members have an equal opportunity to contribute their information and ideas?
6. Study some of the ideas behind 'Dilemma Theory'. There is a section in 'Building Cross Cultural Competence' which outlines this concept. Also go to <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/article/?art=17948&pg=0> on the web.
7. When differences arise during the course of a project, look for different value systems at work. Recognise that creative solutions emerge when apparently opposing values are reconciled as opposed to being suppressed or compromised. When the opportunity arises, practise designing solutions that reconcile opposing values.
8. Develop a greater understanding of the various ways that you can seek to deal with 'differences' and potential conflicts between people. What are the different styles and when are they appropriate? What is your preferred style? Completing the Thomas-Kilman questionnaire will develop your self awareness in this field and alert you to different strategies that can be adopted in different circumstances.

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