

Coaching Across Cultures in Today's Global World

Enrich your coaching and grow by learning from different cultures

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Cultural differences are still all-too-often misunderstood, ignored or inadequately managed, resulting in frustrations, conflicts, financial losses and missed opportunities. When understood and used constructively, however, these differences provide a remarkable source of richness for interactions, learning and growth.

If you think coaching across cultures is reserved for those working on international assignments and traveling abroad, or if you view intercultural coaching as a “niche market” that concerns a minority of professionals (despite the rapid globalization of our economies), you might want to reconsider.

Coaching across cultures has two objectives. One is indeed to enable more effective work across cultures (though not only in an international sense, as we will see). Second, and more fundamentally, intercultural coaching is in essence a more creative and complete form of coaching. The approach challenges cultural assumptions in all situations. It propels you, the coach, and your coachees beyond previous limitations. It offers new options in the form of alternative ways of thinking, communicating, managing time and engaging in your various activities.

What is Culture?

Culture is a group phenomenon. It is the set of characteristics that distinguishes the group's members from another group. Interculturalists have traditionally focused on national cultures. However, we typically belong to several groups at the same time, based on profession, education, generation, gender, industry, organization, division, function, etc. Our behaviors





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depend not only on the personality traits we are born with (according to Carl Jung), but on the various cultural contexts that have shaped us (family, nation, religion) and are still influencing us (organization, function, friends). Our behaviors change depending on the group we happen to be associated with; for example, we may be teasing with friends and more serious at work.

Unfortunately, culture is still often misunderstood as a static and binary concept: we are supposedly either like this or like that, and cannot change. For example, according to this view, we either communicate directly (in the “American” or “German” way) or indirectly (in the “Asian” fashion). Cultural diversity training under this

Our attitudes can be grouped into two broad categories: ethnocentric pitfalls and intercultural approaches. In the first instance, our worldview is central to all reality. We can accomplish this in three ways:

1. Ignore differences;
2. Recognize differences but evaluate them negatively (e.g. engineers denigrating psychologists, marketing looking down on finance);
3. Recognize differences but minimize their importance (i.e. failing to notice uniqueness – ‘we are all the same’).

In the last instance, uniformity – a bland substitute – is promoted in place of unity. Consequently, we fail to tap into the richness of cultural diversity. Intercultural approaches

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view becomes a matter of describing how the “others” behave and what we should do to adapt to that other context. It consists in a series of tips that sometimes paradoxically reinforces stereotypes and polarization.

To coach across cultures, we need instead a dynamic and inclusive notion of culture. For example, we should learn to communicate both directly and indirectly by appreciating the merits of each orientation (clarity in the case of direct communication and sensitivity in the case of indirect). We want to be understood without offending and alienating the other person. Cultural characteristics are both visible (behaviors, artifacts) and invisible (norms, values and basic assumptions).

Coaching from a Cultural Perspective

The first step is to become aware of your own attitudes vis-à-vis cultural differences as well as your specific cultural characteristics. The goal is not to judge these characteristics but rather, pragmatically, to ask yourself how effectively this particular value of yours currently serves you. If ‘hard work’ is important to you but you are on the verge of ‘burnout,’ it may be time to consider French authors who have chanted the merits of ‘laziness.’

happen when you recognize and accept differences, adapting, integrating and ultimately leveraging those differences. This attitude implies neither agreement with a different culture nor adoption. However, it requires openness and curiosity. It requires you to proactively look for gems in different cultures, strive for synergy, and achieve unity through diversity. It means thinking ‘AND’ rather than ‘OR.’

To understand specific cultural characteristics, we need a vocabulary that describes salient cultural traits. The Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) is meant to serve precisely that purpose. The COF includes a range of cultural dimensions/orientations grouped into seven categories of practical importance to leaders, professional coaches and anyone striving to unleash human potential in organizations:

- Sense of power and responsibility;
- Time management approaches;
- Definitions of identity and purpose;
- Organizational arrangements;
- Notions of territory and boundaries;
- Communication patterns; and
- Modes of thinking.

For example, we have found that many coaches on the

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five continents have a preference for 'change,' yet they risk overlooking the importance of 'stability' to succeed in their change efforts: a time to recuperate, to consolidate processes and capitalize on the current situation before rushing into more changes that could not be swallowed. Moreover, time itself is often viewed as a scarce resource in our fast-paced environment. Paradoxically, by slowing down, treating time as if it were plentiful, we can best appreciate its scarcity and focus on what is truly important. Leveraging scarce and plentiful time enables us to achieve efficiency (doing things right) together with effectiveness (doing the right things).

Applications of Coaching Across Cultures

Intercultural coaching works at three levels: with individuals, teams, and organizations. With teams, for example, using the COF assessment¹ allows you to help members visualize overall cultural preferences and systematically explore cultural assets and pitfalls with respect to goals. Most of all, the process leads to useful conversations about new options and concrete actions that can be taken to make the most of various cultural possibilities: collaboration and competition, equality and hierarchy, being and doing, control, harmony and humility, etc.

Beyond individual and team development, coaches can add value by faci-

tating organizational development. Organizations rely on three mechanisms to achieve growth: organic growth, alliances, mergers and acquisitions (M&As). Unfortunately, a high percentage of both alliances and M&As break down prematurely, failing to deliver the expected strategic benefits and inflicting financial damage on both partners. The main reason for failure is the human factor in general and culture in particular.

The good news is that you can reverse this trend through proactive and effective management of cultural differences. For example, in a recent case of a strategic alliance between a French and Dutch company, French managers learned from the Dutch about 'empowerment' while the Dutch learned about 'constructive politics' from the French. Beyond simply respecting or tolerating their foreign colleagues' different style, they were able to learn from it to leverage 'equality' and 'hierarchy.' They became better managers, having more behavioral options available to them.

Finally, in our turbulent and polarized world, coaches equipped to systematically integrate culture into their practice can offer an invaluable contribution by promoting much-needed mutual understanding, unity in diversity and sustainable progress for all.

1 See www.COFassessment.com (you can obtain your COF individual profile at no cost).



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