



Training across Cultures

This month we are offering advice to subscribers working in an international context and either presenting or delivering workshops overseas. Even if you are new to the world of training across cultures, you probably recognise the need to make adjustments for a foreign audience. But how do you know which aspects of your content and training approach should be modified for the places you're going to?

Culture can be defined as the shared values, beliefs and behaviours that people pass down from one generation to the next. Our culture shapes our expectations for most interactions. To maximise training events, trainers need to understand how cultural differences may affect the expectations of their audience. For example, let's look at the following dimensions of culture:

Individualism versus Collectivism: Individualist cultures (Northern Europe, USA) value autonomy whereas collectivist cultures (most Latin, Asian and African countries) value belonging and group harmony.

In individualist cultures, people attend training for self-development, expecting to learn the latest ideas on the subject matter. They are willing to speak freely in a group discussion and will contribute to a debate. Individualists are comfortable working on a task alone. When groups are formed in a workshop, they are happy if the grouping is random.

By contrast, collectivists are more likely to expect to learn time-tested ways of doing things so that they can earn a certification. They find speaking in front of the class embarrassing and they're uncomfortable with open disagreement. Collectivists prefer to work in groups. When groups are formed, they expect that the groupings will be based on existing associations.

For trainers, we recommend emphasizing small-group activities to minimise the likelihood of embarrassment. You may wish to allocate a spokesperson to report on a table's consensus to the rest of the participants. When forming groups, be mindful of pre-existing affiliations. Collectivists will prefer to learn the history and established traditions before being exposed to the newest concepts and techniques.

Low versus High Power Distance: In lower power distance cultures (Northern Europe, Australia, Austria, Israel, New Zealand), participants expect to learn from each other and they expect dialogue. They see their trainers as peers and feel free to speak up in class. Generally, they are comfortable with self-directed activities.

In High Power distance cultures (Asian, Latin, Middle Eastern), participants expect to learn from the expert, the trainer. They expect a teacher-led method, with a clear structure. They are unlikely to speak up unless asked to do so. Participants see their trainer as an authoritative figure that should be respected. So, for trainers working in these cultures, make your status and expertise known. Also, make sure the goals and structure of the workshop are clear. If you want to encourage dialogue in the session, create a structure for it because it's not likely to happen spontaneously. Participants don't always value the ideas of their peers but want to hear what the "expert" trainer has to say.

Achievement versus Ascription: Achievement-oriented cultures (Northern America, Scandinavia) value power, recognition and winning. Ascriptive cultures (China) have a preference for affiliation. In achievement-oriented cultures, participants like to compete in a task and expect rewards for performance. They are more likely to pay attention to other participants who are successful.

In ascriptive cultures, learners are likely to avoid competition and expect rewards for being co-operative. They are likely to be attending the workshop as the subject is interesting to them. In these cultures, downplay your achievements and credentials as you may appear immodest. Consider using activities that require co-operation and don't single out the best learners for praise.

In our view, the best way to ensure that your content and training style will suit your intended audience is to work with your local colleagues in country. He or she could be a co-trainer who reviews your design and presentation before the event. If this isn't possible, then remember the following:

Hints and tips

- Speak in brief, simple sentences rather than long, compound or complex ones. Try not to use complex jargon.
- If you don't understand, ask questions; but keep questions short.
- Don't ask "either/or" questions; pose two questions instead.
- Don't ask negative questions which can be misinterpreted easily; for example, "Don't you like mysteries?"
- Speak slowly and articulate distinctly.
- Avoid idioms and metaphors, e.g., "That's cool."

Things to Try

- If necessary, write the question down or ask the participant to write it down. However, be especially sensitive to participants who do not write in English well.
- If the participant does not understand you fully, try different words or phrases.
- Don't be afraid to use a dictionary.

Different Customs

- Recognize that people from some cultures are not demonstrative. Smiling may hide emotions such as frustration or confusion.
- From participants of some cultures, silence should not be construed as misunderstanding or rudeness. Some other possible reasons are (1) respect for your authority, (2) full agreement with what you are saying or doing, or (3) fear of being judged by how he or she speaks English.
- Don't expect verbal reinforcement such as "I see" or "Uh-huh" when you are explaining something to a participant. Watch for non-verbal communication. If you want an acknowledgment, ask, "Do you understand?" or watch for a nod.
- Remember that in some cultures it is considered polite to avoid eye contact.
- Realize that name order may be different for some cultures. Ask for "family name" instead of "last name." Women from some cultures may retain their maiden names after marriage.

Positive Attitude

- Remember that saving face is important in many cultures. Your attitude is very important. Always show mutual respect.
- Allow time for the patron to translate mentally what you have said.
- Be patient.
- Keep smiling.
- Don't raise your voice; this may be perceived as anger.
- Allow time for participants to accomplish what they came for, even when you are busy.

Get Help

- Know and use the expertise of other staff members, or external agencies such as Babel, who can professionally translate your material.