Managers *sans frontières*: Developing Global Leaders
by Craig Collins

Imagine that you've just been called into the office of your boss. "Good news!" he says. "The Vice President has just approved your transfer to head up our operation in Xanadu. In less than eight weeks you'll be living overseas! Now let's just take a moment to go over the projects you'll have to wrap up here before you get on the plane. By the way, we've enrolled you in a two-day seminar next week on Living and Working in Xanadu*."*

Sounds crazy? It is. But it's also the way most companies approach the increasingly critical task of preparing managers for one of the most daunting challenges of their lives: living and working overseas. No wonder companies report that between 30% and 70% of managers posted to expatriate assignments (at great expense to the company) fail to reach the expected level of performance. And most managers whose jobs involve extensive international travel or contact but who don't actually *live* overseas get no training at all in this area.

It's long been accepted that leadership and other critical managerial skills can be developed. But it's also recognized that this is a process that requires time, effort, money and long-term individual and corporate commitment. Intercultural skills can be developed, too – but not in a one-shot seminar squeezed into the busy weeks before leaving for an international assignment.

If your company is really serious about meeting the human challenges of globalization, then you'll take a long-term, integrated approach to developing a broad base of intercultural competency throughout your organization. For the seriously global company, intercultural effectiveness is a core managerial competency, not a last-minute add-on. Nor is it limited to the relatively small number of expatriates in the company. It's a competency required by everyone in the organization who travels internationally on business, who interacts internationally by phone, fax, E-mail or letter, or who is part of an international team or task force (including virtual ones).
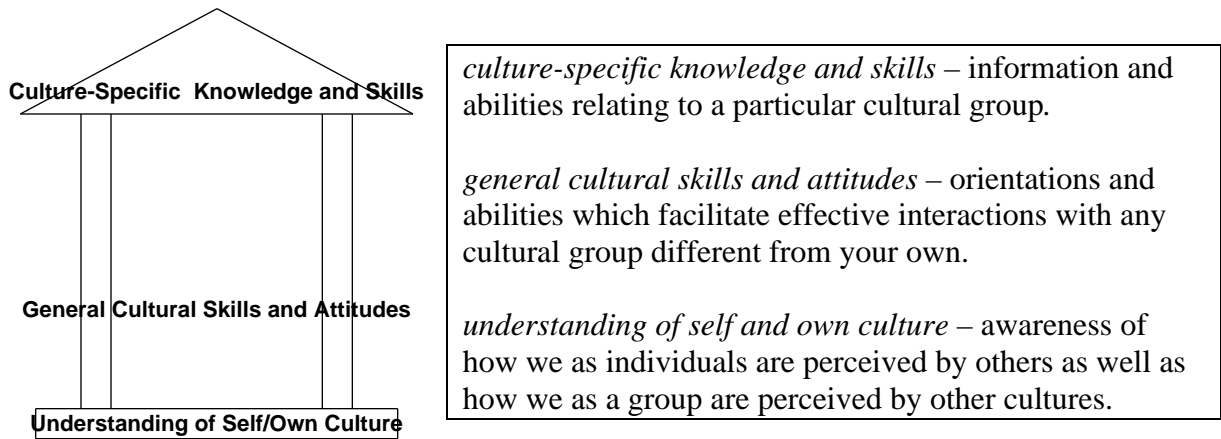
A handful of companies have recognized this reality and have begun to develop intercultural effectiveness as a competency for managers throughout the organization. At DHL Worldwide Express, it's an explicit component of several core competencies that apply to any management position. Dow Corning calls it *sans frontières* ("without borders"), one of ten dimensions of management and organizational development that the company has identified.

Jack Chua, Asia-Pacific Learning and Development Manager for Dow Corning, explains why intercultural effectiveness was included. "Several years ago, our executive management identified the management and organizational dimensions which would be critical for success as Dow Corning enters the next century. One of these dimensions was labeled *sans frontières*. There is a need as we continue to globalize to operate more effectively beyond borders." As part of the implementation group, Jack interviewed Dow Corning executives around the world to

flesh out the *sans frontières* dimension, which includes such skill sets as "thinking transnationally" and "bridging differences".

In developing the Millenium Manager program, DHL also identified ten core competencies that are common to every management position. "Influencing is one of these and includes a need to understand both self and others," according to Roger Byrne, DHL's HRD Director for Asia-Pacific/Middle East. "The competency description includes the words 'demonstrates understanding of own behavioral style, shows awareness of own impact on others, respects cultural differences and adapts style to win commitment from others.'" DHL uses a variety of methods to assess the effectiveness of the Millenium Manager program. "Ultimately, however, success will be that our managers are sensitive to and that they understand the differences between cultures, since international and inter-cultural communication is key to our business."

It's useful to distinguish between three levels of intercultural competency that relate to one another like the roof, walls and foundation of a house.

culture-specific knowledge and skills – information and abilities relating to a particular cultural group.

general cultural skills and attitudes – orientations and abilities which facilitate effective interactions with any cultural group different from your own.

understanding of self and own culture – awareness of how we as individuals are perceived by others as well as how we as a group are perceived by other cultures.

In most organizations, intercultural training efforts focus almost exclusively on the *Culture-Specific Skills and Knowledge* that form the roof (*Doing Business in China*, *Living and Working in the Middle East*, etc.). These efforts can have great value if they build on sound walls and foundation. Without strong walls and foundation, however, very little learning about a specific culture is actually put into practice, and the resources devoted to this training are largely wasted.

Many organizations also put considerable resources into developing the S*elf-Understanding* aspect of the foundation through their management development activities. Because this is rarely linked explicitly to intercultural interactions, it loses most of its potential impact in this area.

It is the walls – the *General Cultural Skills and Attitudes* - that offer the biggest payoff - and that are usually overlooked. A roof built on ramshackle walls collapses. Similarly, unless a strong set of *general cultural skills and attitudes* is first in place, training focused on specific cultures produces little real benefit.

Aside from their role in supporting culture-specific knowledge and skills, the general cultural skills and attitudes are valuable for other reasons. They apply to interactions with *all* other cultures, not just a single specific group, so they are immediately transferable to interactions with a new culture. And, even in dealing with individuals whose culture is unfamiliar or unknown, these skills and attitudes help managers to land on their feet.

Nine General Cultural Skills and Attitudes

Seeing beyond stereotypes – dealing with others as individuals within the context of their own culture rather than as stereotypical cultural clones

A learning orientation – ability to avoid rationalizing away unexpected events in another culture and to exploit them as learning opportunities

Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty – the ability to remain open to contradictory positions for extended periods until clear evidence is available as to which is more valid

Flexible task-relationship balance – openness to different balance between focus on task accomplishment and focus on maintaining positive relationships than at home

Empathy – the ability to identify with another's feelings in a particular situation

The ability to "fail successfully" – willingness to use mistakes as a basis for learning and improvement rather than as a basis for self-selecting own areas of competence and incompetence

A robust sense of humor – the ability to see the humor in small and large frustrations which inevitably permeate intercultural interactions

Sensitivity to communication styles – Ability to shift communication between message and metamessage level as required by cultural context

Non-evaluative perception – observing and interacting without judging or evaluating

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Harry Irwin of the University of Sydney maintains that, "while much culture learning can occur prior to intercultural contact, . . . most learning will take place simultaneously with contact as those involved observe, interact and reflect upon the experience." While culture-specific knowledge might explain the meaning of a particular incident in another culture, the general cultural skills and attitudes enable us to discover the meaning of this specific incident (as well as many others) for ourselves. Thus, strengthening any of the general cultural skills and attitudes provides far greater "bang for the buck" than devoting the same training resources to improving culture-specific skills and attitudes. The relationship is parallel to the proverbial difference between giving someone a fish and teaching them to fish for themselves.

Here are some of the most critical skills and attitudes for interacting successfully with other cultures:

Seeing beyond stereotypes. In our politically correct era, stereotyping is viewed as a process to be avoided at all costs. Yet there is a paradox in most stereotypes: A stereotype can contain some truth about the group as a whole and yet fail to accurately describe any single individual in the group.

The fact that managers invoke stereotypes to try to capture the essence of another cultural group does not automatically make them racists or bigots. It does mean that they are following the mind's natural tendency to learn by identifying, recognizing and extrapolating from recognizable patters.

It's the same learning approach used by a child who avoids touching other "stove-like" objects, after getting burned by a hot stove.

As a working hypothesis or work-in-process, a stereotype is simply a tentative mental model awaiting further testing and elaboration. In this sense, a stereotype can be a helpful intercultural tool. Stereotypes (whether positive or negative) become dysfunctional and damaging when they become the end point for learning about another group rather than the point of departure for getting to know individuals in that group. So the challenge here is to throw out the dirty bathwater of prejudice while saving the baby of learning.

Several years ago I experienced the danger of our unwitting attempts to put individuals into cultural boxes. During a business visit to Saudi Arabia, I was scheduled to call on the HR manager of a large multinational client at 1 pm (my third visit of the day). Having a number of years' experience working in the Middle East, I had often experienced the relatively more relaxed attitude in the Arab world to appointment and meeting times. Thus I was unconcerned that my previous visit had run over and I only arrived just after 1:15 for a 1 pm appointment.

I was taken aback when, after greeting me cordially, the manager's secretary informed me that his boss (an expatriate Arab) had blocked the time from 1 to 1:30 pm for our meeting. When I had not arrived by 1:15, he went on to his next meeting and left a message inviting me to call on him next time I visited Saudi Arabia.

Culture shapes our behavior through values and norms buried deep in our mental programming. But culture also allows each individual limited room for maneuver around the norm. Inside this zone, behavior is still culturally acceptable; outside, it is not.

It is demonstrably true that Arabs as a group tend to be more relaxed in their attitude toward promptness and observance of deadlines than Westerners. Yet both cultures allow individuals some room for maneuver. I am well aware that my laid-back approach to deadlines and schedules is near the limit of what my culture considers acceptable. My Arab counterpart – who I had not previously met – was apparently at the "high regard for time and promptness" end of his culture's spectrum. Thus we both operated appropriately based on a general knowledge of the other's culture, yet the actual nature of our interaction as individuals was the very opposite of what a sound knowledge of the cultures involved would predict.

Managers don't do business with cultures. They do business with individuals operating in the context of their cultures. Learning to see beyond stereotypes is critical to this process.

A learning orientation. A valuable skill set in developing our personalized mental models of individual members of other cultures is what Porter and Tansky have labeled a *learning orientation*.

When Columbus set out across the Atlantic, his rough maps indicated that his voyage would take him to the East Indies. For the rest of his life, he believed he had sailed to Asia, as his maps predicted. It took many years before maps were revised to reflect the existence of the Americas between Europe and Asia.

Sometimes in their own culture (and frequently outside it) managers are confronted with events and behaviors that defy the expectations provided by their mental maps. They face the choice between discounting the unexpected occurrence as an exception to the rule (or assuming some error in observation or reporting), and revising their mental maps in some way that takes account of the unanticipated event.

As the example of Columbus and his contemporaries shows, we attach great emotional and practical value to our existing mental maps and do not entertain altering them lightly. They represent the sum of our life experience. Moreover, it is not just a matter of discarding an old map and replacing it with a new one. Rather we seek to enrich or extend the existing map by somehow integrating the new, contradictory experience into the old map. This can be an unnerving and threatening process, since it requires us to challenge what we thought we knew based on our previous life experience. In the hope (but not certainty) of an increase in understanding in the long run, we must open ourselves to an immediate decrease in understanding now.

Given the psychological discomfort and the risks of this option, it is easy to see why people often choose to ignore, discount or explain away the unanticipated behavior. Yet this is exactly how managers can reinforce their stereotypes in the face of contrary evidence.

In the case of my failed Arabian meeting, my first inclination was to stick to my existing mental map. Based on prior experience, I was sure I was within the allowed time limits of his culture, and from this perspective his behavior was unexpected. It was only after considerable reflection that I found a way to understand his behavior in a way that was consistent with my own prior experience (and mental maps) but which also recognized his behavior as consistent with the norms of his own culture.

Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. Imagine you have just taken over management of a key overseas account. Your predecessor (whose nationality was the same as the foreign client) has assured you that written contracts are just a formality for this client and that it's the handshake that really counts. Yet the client is now claiming a rebate because your company failed to comply with several trivial and insignificant details of the contract. Would you:

  a) conclude that your predecessor misled you?
  b) conclude that the client is giving you a hard time because, unlike your predecessor, you are not one of their countrymen?
  c) remain undecided for the present and open to other possible explanations for the client's unexpected behavior?

A *learning approach* requires managers to use unexpected behaviors by individuals from other cultures as learning opportunities rather than to massage the unexpected into existing stereotypes. Frequently the learning approach takes time -–sometimes a very long time. During this time managers must remain open to two or more contradictory positions and the ambiguity that this entails. Some individuals have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than others. But, whatever the individual manager's baseline, intensive interaction with individuals from other cultures will only succeed if the manager is able and willing to operate in an environment of increased uncertainty.

Flexible task-relationship balance. In any group situation, a manager must strike a balance between *task behavior* (meeting deadlines, producing quality output, optimizing resource usage) and *relationship behavior* (maintaining group morale and individual motivation, promoting positive relationships). Experience and training assist managers in finding the right balance for different groups and situations.

Managing individuals from other cultures requires the willingness to be more flexible in this area. Gut feel may guide the manager at home but provides misleading guidance in other cultures. In most situations, Western managers must pay relatively more attention to the relationship dimension and accept more slippage in the task dimension than in their own cultures.

Several years ago a multinational oil company acquired offshore concessions in Vietnam. Exploration verified commercial viability, and production was scheduled to commence on October 1. The project had high visibility and was extensively covered in the international press.

Production did indeed commence as planned on October 1, yet the company's position in Vietnam was severely weakened in the long run. On-site managers were aware that their performance against target was being closely followed at corporate headquarters. In order to meet a deadline that was internally imposed, they pressed local suppliers, pressured local partners and pushed local employees to the limit. This high task-oriented focus might have been acceptable at home, and it did meet the short-term target. The cost, however, was serious long-term damage to many local relationships whose viability was essential to the project's ongoing success. The costs of allowing the production target to slip for a few weeks might have been small compared to costs resulting from friction, resentment and damaged relationships in subsequent years.

Empathy. Psychologist Lauren Wispé distinguishes empathy from sympathy as follows: "In empathy, one attends to the feelings of another; in sympathy one attends to the suffering of another, but the feelings are one's own."

Sympathy is imagining how *I* would feel in your position. Empathy is imagining how *you* feel in your position. The ability to empathize is contingent on a sound understanding of the other's perspective, values and feelings. Thus it begins with questioning and listening rather than telling.

Empathy does not necessarily mean agreement or approval of the feeling being expressed. But it does mean that the feeling is understood and clearly acknowledged. Empathy is a vital tool for enriching managers' mental maps in their interactions with other cultures.

The ability to "fail forward". Imagine that you are playing in a football game. All the other players and spectators can see the markings on the field, but you cannot. As far as you can tell, you are playing on an open field. You are continually penalized for disregarding lines you cannot see.

Managers interacting with another culture find that they are forever crossing invisible boundaries and breaking unwritten rules that are well understood by members of the other culture. And they're never told that they are *about to* cross a boundary, only that they have just crossed it.

Managers inevitably experience the sense of failure far more frequently in other cultures than at home. To function effectively, it is vital to bounce back and not to become discouraged or to blame others. This inevitable stream of failures is the raw material for new learning and more extensive mental maps to managers who understand it as a normal consequence of integrating an unfamiliar culture and who learn to move quickly beyond feelings of frustration, self-pity or anger.

A robust sense of humor. It is easy to see the humor in a situation when the joke is on someone else. It's a greater challenge to appreciate the humor when the joke is on us – as it often feels when interactions with other cultures take unexpected and undesired twists. Finding the humor in the situation is one of the quickest ways to rebound from failure. It has nothing to do with telling jokes or playing the fool and certainly not with belittling or making fun of others. Finding the humor in the situation is greatly facilitated by the ability to take a perspective other than one's own.

I once was bargaining for several musical instruments in a shop in Bolivia. My final bargaining tactic was going to be to demand a better price if I bought all the instruments under discussion as a set. I flourished this trump card at the last moment and was relieved yet surprised that my final offer was readily accepted. It was only later that I discovered that I had made an error in my mental addition and actually offered *more* than the last asking price.

That realization left me feeling sheepish and frustrated. But I had to admit that, from any perspective other than my own, it must have been a vastly amusing scene to watch.

We hope, of course, that managers are more meticulous in their calculations than I was in mine. There will nevertheless be more than enough mishaps in intercultural interactions. Managers who learn how to see the humor in such situations will produce better results *and* have fewer ulcers.

Sensitivity to communication styles. Communication takes place on two planes: the *message* (the literal content of the communication) and the *metamessage* (the meaning attributed to the context in which the message is communicated). When I reply "It was fine" to the waiter's query "How is your meal?" I can communicate widely differing meanings according to the choice of intonation. Deborah Tannen, among others, has explored misunderstandings at the metamessage level in US culture.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall distinguished between *low context* and *high context* cultures. In low context cultures, most of the meaning of a communication is to be found in the *words* of the message. Western cultures lie on this side of the spectrum. In high context cultures, much of the meaning resides not in the words themselves, but in *how*, *when* and *to whom* they are said (and even in what is *not* said). In other words, high context cultures rely heavily on metamessages to communicate meaning. Eastern cultures fall on this side of the spectrum.

A sales representative poses the question, "What is your reaction to our proposal?" The foreign client responds, "Your proposal certainly contains many positive points." In a low context culture, this response probably indicates general satisfaction with the proposal. In a high context culture, on the other hand, the most significant part of the message may be what is *not* said: What about the points that weren't seen as positive? The client's metamessage politely invites the sales rep to ask "Ah, are there other areas that you have concerns about?"

When both cultures rely on similar styles, communication across cultural boundaries is less risky. When managers interact with cultures on the other side of the spectrum, however, new challenges arise requiring new skills and sensitivities. To develop these skills, managers need a conceptual framework as well as practice and feedback.

Non-evaluative perception. Reaching conclusions, forming opinions and taking decisions are such common and frequent occurrences that they often take place outside our awareness. In our primitive ancestors, the ability to decide and act had enormous survival value, and we still admire and expect decisiveness in our corporate leaders.

Even within our own culture, however, there are times when it is important (if difficult) to suspend judgment. Effective listening, negotiating, conflict resolution, coaching and mentoring all require non-judgmental attending. When managers interact with other cultures, however, the decisiveness that serves them well in their own culture can become a serious liability. The events take place in another culture, but managers observe and evaluate them through the lenses of their own culture.

The evaluative process is particularly subversive when it takes place out of awareness. It is like a card game where the cards are the same but everyone else is following different rules. If I unconsciously assume the rules I'm following to be universal, then I will conclude that others are cheating. If I develop the skill of non-evaluative perception, on the other hand, I will observe that others seem not to be playing by the rules as I know them, and I will use this observation as the basis for further investigation before reaching any (conscious or unconscious) conclusions.

Self-Knowledge and Understanding of Own Culture – The foundation of intercultural effectiveness is a strong sense of oneself as an individual, an accurate perception of how one is perceived by others, and an awareness of how one's culture is perceived by members of other cultures. There is a reinforcing loop between this foundation and *general cultural skills and attitudes* that make up the walls. It is obvious that a strong foundation promotes development of general cultural skills and attitudes. It is less obvious – but a significant leverage point – that well-managed interactions with other cultures using the general cultural skills and attitudes increase self-knowledge and understanding of one's own culture. In fact, if properly managed, interactions with other cultures present an opportunity for accelerated personal growth.

Unfortunately, the linkage also works in reverse. Managers with low self-awareness and an ethnocentric view of other cultures have a weak foundation for interacting with other cultures. They are likely to approach other cultures in a defensive way and to experience little or no personal growth from the interaction. A weak foundation provides little basis for deploying or developing

the general cultural skills and attitudes. The absence of these skills, in turn, means that little or no self-knowledge is gained from the interactions with other cultures. If anything, stereotypes of self as well as others are simply reinforced.]

Positions involving extensive interactions with other cultures offer challenges and opportunities at two levels. Developing a broad base of intercultural effectiveness represents a powerful and growing competitive advantage in our era of globalization. In addition, viewing international assignments as development opportunities and preparing managers to make full use of these opportunities exploits a vastly underutilized resource for personal and professional growth.

Global companies such as DHL and Dow Corning recognize this. They see intercultural effectiveness as a core managerial competency and as an essential prerequisite for success in the international marketplace. They recognize that the underlying skills and attitudes can be learned and developed and that formal training plays a major role in this learning process.

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