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CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION

How can you best support your staff to overcome language, communication, and culture challenges in today's global market?

Corporate Learning Week

Cross-Border Collaboration Whitepaper

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Cross-Border Collaboration: How can you best support your staff to overcome language, communication, and culture challenges in today's global market?

The Corporate Learning Week conference, held in Orlando, Florida from November 12 – 15, 2013 was a successful learning event. Corporate executives, university heads, government officials and learning professionals participated in peer sessions, shared innovative learning strategies, and recommended tools to sustain current and future global organizations. Included in the agenda were several opportunities to share refreshed learning trends in peer dialogue and conversations. This whitepaper is a direct result of the roundtable discussions hosted by Melanie Fox of eBerlitz and Ila Gandhi of TMC within Berlitz, a Global Education Company.

Cross-Border Collaboration

The roundtable theme was geared towards the unique and unprecedented business challenges faced by organizations as they grow globally. Global collaboration and workforce diversity is not a transient phenomenon; it is today's reality and here to stay. Many organizations are faced with the complexities of working with employees that are distributed around the globe, bringing diverse languages, cultures, communication styles, and leadership perspectives. These organizations need to retool development programs to equip leaders with new collaborative skills so that they can divest themselves of personal biases and prejudicial attitudes so as to unleash the potential of a multicultural domestic and global workforce.

General Conversational Themes that Emerged from the Roundtable Discussion, Part I

Language

- Accent Challenges – Maintaining focus while listening to someone with a marked accent can be “painful” and difficult.
- Words and Colloquialisms – A word or phrase can have a different meaning elsewhere in the world (US vs. UK English, for example). Building an awareness of these differences can save individuals from cultural faux pas and potentially detrimental misunderstandings.
- It is necessary to study and understand the languages and customs of regions where organizations are represented.
- A party that speaks both languages (home and target market) has an edge over another that speaks only one language during business-related face-to-face interactions.



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Communications

- Problems arise from the usage of job-specific terminology or jargon that is difficult to translate – Ex. in job descriptions, writing letters, etc.
- It can prove difficult for language learners to interpret similes, colloquial phrasing, certain aspects of grammar, setting expectations and finding the common ground to reach agreements.
- Differences in communication style can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications.
- When all else fails, one should avoid using acronyms or slang in written and oral communications and test out certain slogans to ensure they translate and “localize” appropriately.

Language and Business Communication Skills — TMC, Berlitz Summary

Is English sufficient for conducting business in a global economy? Does proficiency in other languages and the ability to understand cultural differences provide employees a fast-track in their careers?

A research report published by Christine Uber Grosse, Department of Global Business at Thunderbird University, shared the results of an electronic survey of Thunderbird alumni (Thunderbird graduates from 1970 to 2002) focused on this very issue.

The report published in the *Modern Language Journal* Vol. 88. No iii (2004) states that out of the 581 alumni responding to the survey, over 80% indicated that their foreign language and cultural skills training at Thunderbird have benefited them in their careers. Half of them acknowledged that their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures has given them a significant competitive advantage. Only 18% derived no competitive advantage from their foreign language skills. Even fewer, 11% of the respondents, gained no advantage from their cultural competence. These survey results are from 2004, we can extrapolate that today’s results would be an even more convincing win for foreign language skills, as the economy is far more entrenched globally as compared with that of 2004.

There is a lot to be said for what is lost in translation. Crystal clarity in understanding spoken word is quite difficult to retrieve without speaking the language itself. Next time you see a foreign blockbuster movie, take a friend who speaks the foreign language natively with you. As you debrief the scenes and the story line with your colleague, it will become apparent in how much was lost in translation, despite your efforts to follow the subtitles. As a native Hindi speaker, I (Ila Gandhi) can personally vouch for this loss as watching Bollywood movies with English sub-titles is a riot. I get more laughs out of reading the English sub-titles than from concentrating on the actual scene in Hindi.

Beyond the level of the words themselves, there’s also what linguists refer to as semantics, pragmatics, and discourse—all contributing to an all-encompassing layer we refer to as “communications.” Having



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communication skills that are at a sufficient level of competence is another crucial aspect of language, especially as applies to business. Not just the words you select, but the phrasing in which you present them, and the mannerisms you display while doing so, all convey meaning. And the recipient of the message, whether consciously or subconsciously, decodes or interprets all of these transmitted signals (both verbal and nonverbal) as part of the message. Often, countries have norms that are extremely relevant to business interactions, including verbal aspects: business-appropriate language, industry-specific lexicons as well as non-verbal ones: arrival times, greetings, use of silence, acceptability and manners of interrupting, eye contact, physical contact (ex. shaking hands), and other aspects of body language. Becoming fluent in the language of business communications can be just as important to a career in today's global marketplace as any other.

General Conversational Themes that Emerged from the Roundtable Discussion, Part II

Cultural Competence

- Cultural competence correlates closely with flexibility and change knowledge.
- Global competence includes the ability to solve problems and make decisions across cultural spectrums of behavior, bias, preference and personality differences.
- Open-mindedness and flexible cognitive skills help provide the ability to recognize and leverage diversity as a “world of possibilities.”
- Self-awareness (must be a conscious effort) leads to awareness of others; try to analyze and understand your own cultural biases (many times influenced by personal experiences) before trying to understand another's (often with different experiences as compared with your own).
- Leaders must align and tweak global strategies based on local needs and cultural differences.
- Must-do's in being a global player/leader:
 - Understand and adapt your behavior to other cultures.
 - Maintain a high level of tolerance, which allows one to adapt to cultural differences with ease.
 - Sustain a heightened level of awareness and respect for other cultures/countries.
 - Learn to adapt behaviors to be considerate of cultural traditions.
 - Do your homework—take time to get to know the other culture.
 - If available, leverage local cultural mentors to assimilate into another culture (often highly valued by organizations).



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Is Cultural Competence a competitive advantage or a critical skill?

- A “competitive advantage”...
 - Critical skills yield a competitive advantage. It is important to know the “business norms” of how to conduct business in another country. If you know how to do this well it is a competitive advantage.
- A “competitive advantage” or a “critical skill” depending on skill level and application:
 - It’s a critical skill if correctly developed, and competitive advantage with experience and practice.
 - The answer depends on where the organization is in its evolution of globalization. In some companies, it could be a competitive advantage, and in others, a critical skill.
 - It is both a competitive advantage and a critical skill – can be overlooked in the short run but not in the long term, particularly if you are a major brand working globally with suppliers and customers.
- The answer varies with location:
 - In North America, a competitive advantage – elsewhere, a critical skill.
- Other comments:
 - One might interpret culture as a weakness and be gravely wrong.

Cultural Competence - TMC, Berlitz Summary

Cultural Competence

What is it?

To put it simply, cultural competence is the ability to navigate, communicate and interrelate effectively when encountering cultural differences.

What does it do?

Cultural competence builds capability to reduce risk and maximize opportunities of similarities and differences in achieving results that benefit both parties. However, in today’s complex business environment, cultural knowledge by itself is no longer sufficient. One has to leverage this knowledge to produce the appropriate cultural responses to achieve results—this can be challenging and takes time to develop. It takes trial and error, patience and a deep commitment to self-discovery, practice, and adjustment while building experience—it is hard, potentially arduous, work.

Imagine the challenges faced by a global manager who supervises a team covering six countries, with each member bringing his/her individual cultural perspectives along with a myriad of country-specific norms and values. Intimate knowledge of each country’s cultural norms, beliefs and values, while significant, is

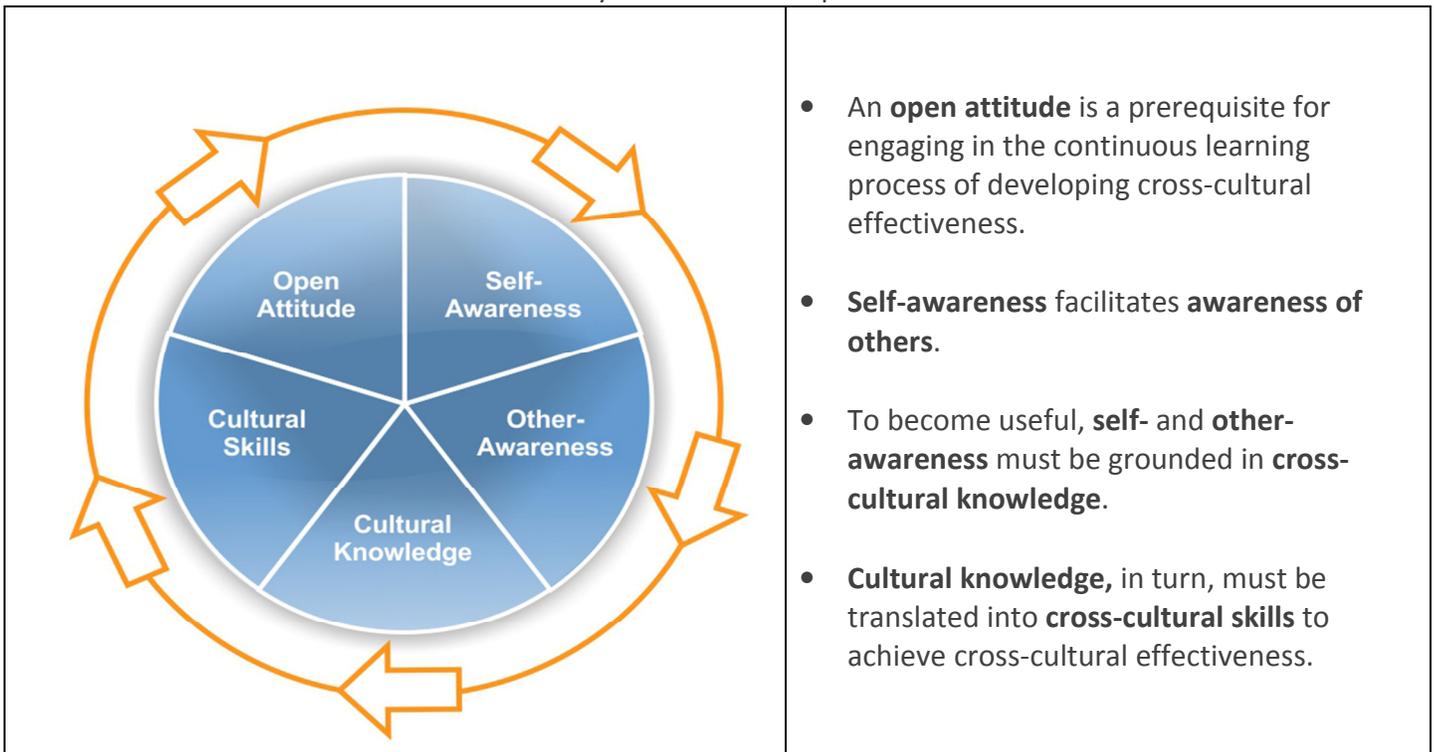
impractical in this scenario. In this instance, the global manager must be equipped with a global mindset, meta-cognitive skills and flexibility, so that with experience (and over time) he or she can leverage and work with new information concerning the specific cultural issues relevant to the team.

A conscious awareness of stereotyping is paramount in cultural competence. With knowledge comes confidence; and once we learn about the cultural values and norms of a certain culture, it is easy to overgeneralize (incorrectly) that everyone from that culture is the same. For example, if I know that India is a *hierarchical culture*, and based on this, I assume I can predict a particular Indian person’s perceptions, beliefs, preferences and/or reactions based on this knowledge, then, I am grossly stereotyping. Cultural competence translates into a thought process like the following: “I know that India is generally a hierarchical culture, however let me first interact with my Indian colleague to determine if he/she has a hierarchical preference, understanding that values and norms represent just a small fraction of many different features contributing to my Indian colleague’s intentions and actions.”

The Journey to Cultural Competence

Individuals must identify where they are on their journey towards cultural competence with the knowledge that we are all at different points on this journey, based on our varying past experiences. Spending time in self-reflection and self-discovery can go a long way as you navigate the path to cultural agility.

Journey to Cultural Competence





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Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is such a critical process in attaining cultural competence that it makes sense to spend some time reflecting on this segment of the journey.

Why is self-awareness important?

Self-awareness in a cultural context translates to understanding your cultural preferences and becoming aware of how others perceive these preferences.

Cultural self-awareness provides an opportunity to:

- Leverage cultural preferences and address perceptions regarding it.
- Earn credibility and cultivate relationships based on knowledge, trust and respect.
- Develop openness to new ideas, inquiry, and constructive criticism.

Becoming aware of these preferences is difficult, since culture is not conscious to us. Most of us are blissfully unaware of these subconscious levers; if we continue to remain unaware, we will be more adept to misinterpreting behaviors/actions at work, since our experiences, our values and our cultural background lead us to see and do things in a certain way.

Committing to a self-awareness process is uncomfortable and requires stepping outside cultural boundaries in order to realize the impact culture has on behavior. However, if we stick with a process to develop self-awareness, it can play a significant role in how we leverage new cultural skills to positively impact interactions at work.

In becoming culturally self-aware, we realize:

- We are not all the same and that is normal.
- Similarities and differences are equally important and should be leveraged at every opportunity.
- There are many different ways to resolve a business issue – if one does not work, try another.
- Each situation requires its own solution—what worked once may not work the next time.

How do you become self-aware?

Distinguished scientist, Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, said (on the importance of self-awareness): “If you don’t know what you’re doing, you can’t do what you want.” First thing’s first; you have to become aware of what you are doing in order to achieve a desired outcome. So how do you become *aware*?



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Note below several opportunities to build self-awareness.

- Find a way to bring underlying cultural assumptions to the surface by being more attentive to your thoughts and judgments—step back and listen to your inner voice.
- Once you have completed your assessment, validate that these are your cultural preferences.
- Practice a neutral vocabulary at every opportunity, so that it becomes second nature.
- Gather feedback from your circle of influence to continuously tie behaviors to your cultural preferences; it is an iterative process, the more you learn, the more you grow.
- Validate, validate, and validate again your cultural preferences at every opportunity—since these will likely change over time.

Cultural Skills

Practicing the four cultural skills (defined below) is fundamental to becoming culturally competent:

- **Cultural Due Diligence:** The process by which we assess all possible implications and effects on cultural relationships at work
- **Style-Switching:** The ability to leverage a broad and flexible behavioral “cultural bank” to deal with each cultural situation by adapting behavior to accomplish a certain goal
- **Cultural Dialogue:** The ability to neutrally highlight cultural differences, bridge and close cultural gaps and create cultural harmony through dialogue and conversation
- **Cultural Mentoring:** The ability to advise, teach and coach others in cultural situations and the wherewithal to understand when you personally may need a cultural mentor (after all, no one is perfect)

If you are interested in learning more about the other areas (being open-minded, cultural knowledge and awareness of others) in the journey towards cultural competence, please connect with the authors of this whitepaper.

How can we help?

Berlitz (including TMC and eBerlitz solutions) offers a wide range of online and face-to-face, formal and informal, self-paced and experiential learning programs to develop the skills necessary to be successful in today’s global business environment. Whether it is language, communications, or global leadership training, we have the flexibility to design and deliver integrated development solutions that are the right fit for your organization. Please contact Ila or Melanie if you are interested in learning more about our portfolio of solutions for language, culture, and/or communications.



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In conclusion, globalization has had an impact on every person who interacts with others to accomplish tasks and improve work performance. Whether you are part of a domestic, international or global organization, and whether you are based in Toledo, United States, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, or in Poona, India, you too can successfully interact and do business with people from other countries, with differing language backgrounds, communication styles, and cultural norms. With proper preparation, you can build relationships with individuals who build relationships differently, who think and process differently and who bring a different sense of self to work every day. Organizations that understand the complexity of this multinational work environment have the edge to compete and succeed in a global economy.



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Roundtable Participants

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The Berlitz portfolio of solutions includes:

1) **Language:**

- On-demand self-study, *CyberTeachers*, in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German
- Private or group lessons (online or onsite) in any language

2) **Culture:**

- On-demand *Cultural Navigator™* platform for individuals or enterprise use
- Online or onsite workshops
- Custom consulting in culture, leadership, and more

3) **Communications** (*Business Communication Skills*):

- Private or group lessons (online or onsite) for English or Spanish communications



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