

Taking Cultural Training

Preparing transferees for an international assignment starts with language training, cultural briefings, and logistical meetings. Rhodes and Rhodes-Naughton explain why no training of international assignees is complete without core instruction about the meaning of culture and an understanding of the transferee's own culture.

BY JERUSHA T. RHODES AND
MOLLY RHODES-NAUGHTON

“I considered myself to be culturally-savvy,” said one shipping company manager who wished to go unnamed. “I thought, ‘Hey! I’ve read every book out there about living in Singapore.’ It wasn’t until I had a major bout with culture shock that I really started to understand *culture*.”

“Culture” is a powerful buzzword in international business and global relocation. Everyone knows that when people are relocated to new countries, they inevitably will come into close contact with new and different cultures. Routinely, organizations attempt to prepare the individuals to function effectively and productively in new and different cultural environments by providing informational materials on the specific cultures, briefings, training, and logistical support.

Despite these standard preparations, one key component of effective cultural training and relocation support is frequently overlooked or underestimated. This is a basic introduction to and understanding of the general concept of culture. This key concept is the foundation from which an individual can learn to respect, understand, negotiate, and manage all of the culture-related issues he or she will encounter.

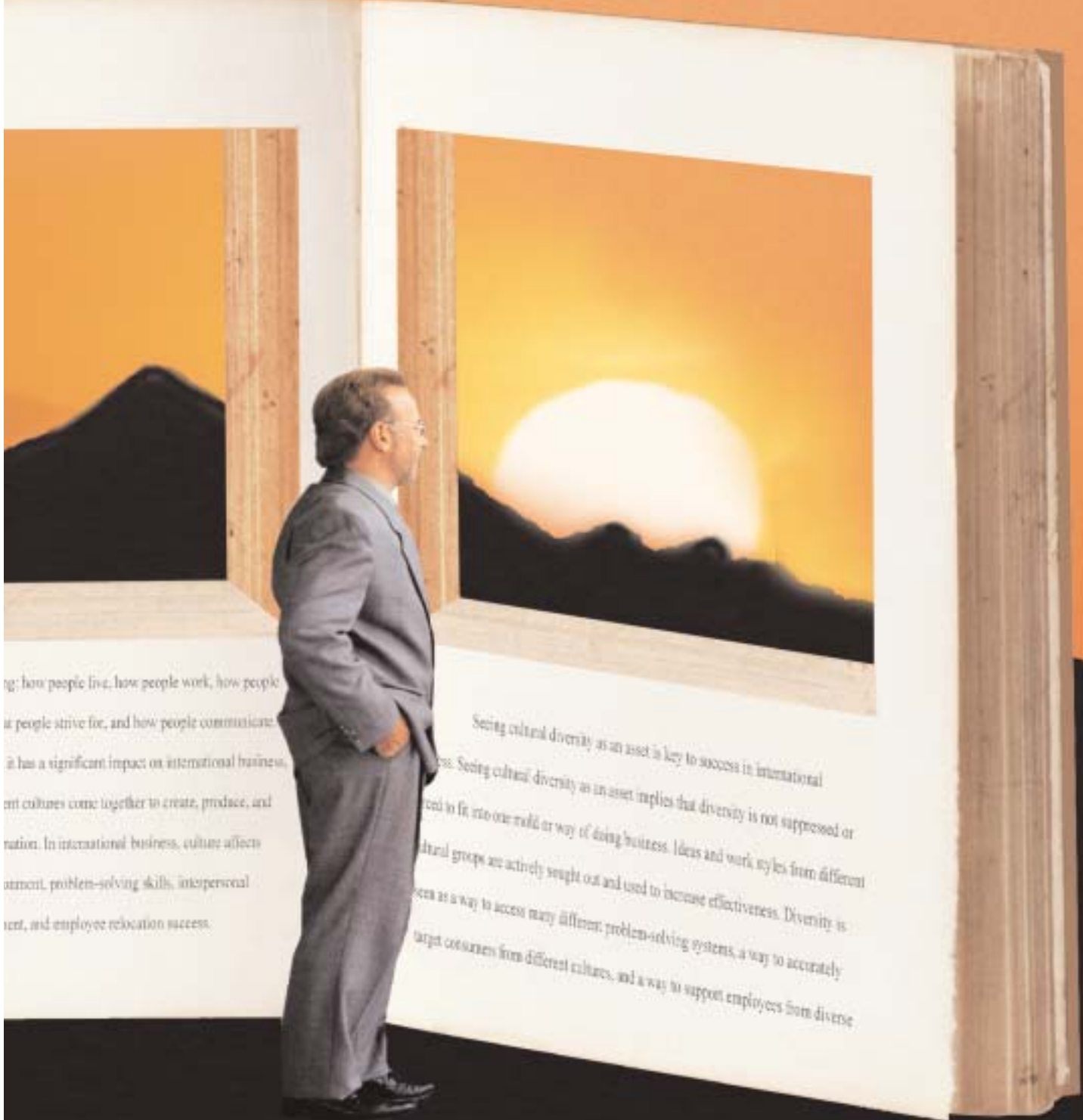
What is Culture?

To begin with, what is culture? It is impossible to effectively prepare people to manage culturally related issues unless they



INTERNATIONAL

Out of the Culture Books



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understand what culture is. In general, culture is a dynamic identity, shared among a group, which shapes both phenomenological and more abstract aspects of human behavior. Culture shapes who people are, what people do, and how people think. Furthermore, culture is not only the information, but also the process by which that information is transmitted and taught.

Frequently, culture is described by discussing only the phenomenological aspects of how people dress, speak, behave, work, eat, and communicate. These aspects of culture are easily visible to an observer and easily conveyed by the trainer, but there are many other more subtle aspects of culture. These include how people think of themselves, how people think of the world, what people strive for, and what is valued.

These aspects of culture are not immediately obvious to outsiders, and they may not even be conscious realities for members of the culture. For example, a person will have no diffi-

culty describing their culture in terms of dress, food, or living style, but it may be much harder for them to explain what shapes their values, belief systems, reasoning, and problem-solving skills.

Edward T. Hall, an intercultural communication expert and author of *Beyond Culture*, describes this characteristic of culture by using the example of an iceberg. Only a very small amount of the iceberg is visible above the water. The majority of the iceberg is out of sight beneath the water. One knows it is there, but cannot see its shape or size. Using Hall's analogy, the visible part of culture includes the language, dress, and food habits of the culture. The obscured part of culture describes the values, beliefs, thought patterns, and self-consciousness.

Culture is ever changing, not stagnant. It is perpetually influenced by changes in the historical, political, and geographical environment. It also is shaped by contact with other cultures and technological developments.

It may seem cliché to say that everyone has culture, but it is true. As part of the natural course of development and socialization, individuals learn what is expected within their group or society. One learns what is right and wrong, and how one is expected to behave. One learns language, dress, social interactions, as well as many other things. We learn culture.

Culture affects everything: how people live, how people work, how people interact, what people value, what people strive for, and how people communicate. So it should come as no surprise that it has a significant impact on international business, where people from many different cultures come together to create, produce, and disseminate products and information. In international business, culture affects management styles, work environment, problem-solving skills, interpersonal relationships, product development, and employee relocation success.

Diversity Is an Asset

Seeing cultural diversity as an asset is key to success in international business. Seeing cultural diversity as an asset implies that diversity is not suppressed or forced to fit into one mold or way of doing business. Ideas and workstyles from different cultural groups are actively sought out and used to increase effectiveness. Diversity is seen as a way to access many different problem-solving systems, a way to accurately target consumers from different cultures, and a way to support employees from various cultural backgrounds. This perspective not only facilitates success in varying domestic work environments, but it also is key to success in international relocation.

Recognizing cultural diversity as an asset is tied directly to the recognition that no one culture is more advanced or more valuable than another. It is precisely this misconception, whether it be consciously expressed or deeply rooted in the subconscious, which foils many cross-cultural contacts. If a person believes that a culture is less valuable, or does not do certain things as well as another, then they automat-

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ically will try to push people from that culture into other behaviors, behaviors that are “more valuable,” “more effective,” or “better.” Accepting that there is no hierarchy and trying not to dictate behaviors and actions based on this belief is a very difficult task, but if implemented, its impact on the effectiveness of international business is strikingly visible.

Cultural Negotiation

Cultural negotiation skills grow

out of a basic understanding of culture by preparing individuals to be aware of where potential conflicts may arise. By pinpointing potential conflicts or issues, individuals can decide the best method for conflict resolution. Is the conflict stemming from something that the individuals can compromise on, or is it stemming from something that the individuals feel so strongly about that compromise is impossible?

Expecting others to simply behave

how one wants them to is not an effective cultural negotiation strategy. One must be able to sympathize and imagine the other person’s motivations for their actions and desires. Furthermore, one has to be able to accept that these motivations may come from valid culturally-based forces and concerns.

Cultural negotiation also necessitates the recognition that there is no hierarchy in culture. Cultural negotiation skills are indispensable to international business and international relocation.

Culture in Relocation

Culture plays into relocation in many ways. The obvious way is that a relocated individual will be living in another culture that is different from his or her own. This will mean that some and potentially many realities will be different, on an observable and unobservable level. One common reaction to these differences is “culture shock.”

“Culture shock” frequently is associated with emotions, ranging from discomfort to panic, felt when an individual is placed into a cultural situation different from their own. This means that when a French woman moves to the United States, she potentially will experience culture shock from things such as language, food, dress, socializing, work environment, and interpersonal relationships.

Another aspect or type of culture shock is the shock that one experiences from one’s own culture. When a person changes environments, when a family is relocated to another country, they may for the first time truly come into contact with their *own* culture. When juxtaposed with another culture, their culture, which may have seemed to be a general norm before, now becomes very obvious and overt to them. This type of self-realization and accompanying self-analysis can be very difficult and incapacitating. This can drastically affect a relocated employee’s success, unless the employee is familiar with the nature of culture and how culture can be managed and negotiated both externally and internally.

Alyson Dagang, Panama country



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director, School of International Training, Brattleboro, VT, claims that she did not really understand her own native culture until she was relocated to Costa Rica.

"I had a lot of interaction with my colleagues from Costa Rica," said Dagang. "I had lived there for a year after college. I spoke Spanish fluently. I assumed I had enough information to avoid culture shock when I was relocated to San José, Costa Rica. But it hit me like a truck. I guess I had finally started to really understand culture and start to evaluate my own; and it was a tough process!"

Furthermore, this points to the need for relocated employees to be well-versed in the reality of culture and how it shapes individuals *before* they relocate. Even though no theoretical experience can ever be as illuminating as first-hand experience of seeing one's own culture in contrast to another culture, the foundation that general cultural knowledge provides can be the difference between a successful relocation and an early return.

A financial manager of a pharmaceutical company offered, "My preparation included language training, cultural briefings, and a theoretical lesson. The theoretical part got me thinking about what *culture* really was—before I even got to Copenhagen, Denmark. Once there, I still had to make a major adjustment, but I did it being cognizant of the implications of culture."

It also can be the difference between employees who tolerate the culture they are relocated to, and employees who relish the differences and are on the path to becoming cultural interpreters.

A cultural interpreter is someone who, similar to a linguistic interpreter, can translate meaning from one culture to another in a manner that successfully and appropriately conveys meaning. This type of person is an invaluable asset in international business where business is conducted across cultural lines.

Culture is not simply the differences that are easily seen between

different groups. Culture runs much deeper. Culture has the power to shape any and all events, and this is especially poignant when discussing international business. Beyond the specific cultural information and observation of phenomenological cultural differences, international employees are better prepared to effectively perform when relocated and when working on cross-cultural teams if they possess a basic knowledge and understanding of culture. ■



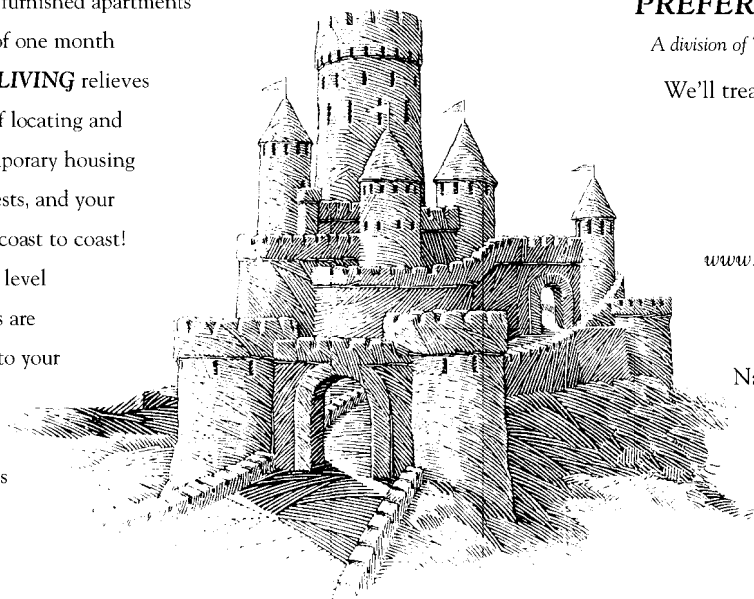
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