

INTRODUCTION TO INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: 5 GOLDEN RULES

ERMES

ENHANCING
RESOURCES FOR
MOBILITY
EXPERIENCES AND
STRATEGIES

LLP-LdV-TOI-11-IT-592
Agreement N° 2011-1-IT1-LEO05-01895
CUP G32F1100090006

Colophon

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Publishing organisation and technical editing:



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November 2013

E.R.M.E.S. project

Project number: **LLP-LdV-TOI-11-IT-592**

Agreement N° 2011-1-IT1-LEO05-01895 - G32F11000090006

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Hi and welcome to the world of cultures.

In this module you will be learning a little more about intercultural awareness and intercultural competence, that is all you need to know concerning culture to successfully study and work abroad

Culture is what distinguished a particular group of people, in terms of language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. A work placement abroad is a great experience diving into a well-defined culture. But how to confront with intercultural differences? You have to walk a three-steps path:

- preparation
- travel abroad
- reintegration

If the preparation phase has already been described in the proper section (see the Work Placement Module), the phase of travelling abroad deserves a deeper analysis. Several steps characterizes this phase:

- the honeymoon (initial enthusiasm) when everything seems new and fascinating followed by
- a psychological adjustment, when you start to perceive the differences in the mentality, feelings and behaviour, between the host country and the cultural standards acquired at home. This could cause you negative feelings. What could follow can range from
- a crisis of adaptation (cultural shock) and you experience sensations of anxiousness, insecurity and frustration towards the host culture, which provokes a permanent state of tension, complicates social relations and your performance at work. It's also the period in which you will probably feel homesick to, but after that a new phase comes: it is called
- adaptation: now you have understood the rules of the game in the host country and are fully able to apply them. There are three indicators to evaluate the level of success of the adaptation: subjective satisfaction with your living and working conditions, the quality of social relations and the level of achievement of professional objectives set.

When the work placement has come to an end, it's time to plan the return and several feelings can fill your heart, ranging from fear of going home, to enthusiasm for the return. After your return, that is, after the initial crisis of readjustment upon return, you will be able to find your place back in your country, family and possibly world of job.

Now that you are interculturally aware and you know how to effectively confront with intercultural differences, it's time to develop your intercultural competence.

Let's not waste a minute more: step into a world of intercultural tips and your studying and working stay abroad will turn out easier than you expected.

Walk your tour through intercultural competence, take the five golden steps to gain your deep knowledge of what intercultural awareness is:

Step # 1: Knowing yourself and others

Step # 2: Intercultural communication

Step # 3: Negotiating and influencing

Step # 4: International leadership mindset

Step # 5: Creative entrepreneurship mindset

Step # 1: Knowing yourself and others

Studying or working in a different culture calls for a deep knowledge of yourself and your own culture. The basic condition for dealing with the strange, for understanding the strange, getting used to and gradually accepting the strange is getting to know your own differentness in respect of the culture you are coming into contact with. Because, first of all, you are a person with your own frame of reference; your own way of acting, thinking and feeling.

¿QUESTION TIME?

To start a profitable relationship with other people from other cultures, first you should be able to answer introspective questions about yourself such as:

what am I passionate about?, what are my personal values?, what's important to me?, what motivates me?, what contribution would I like to make to the world? what's my greatest strength?, what are my most valuable skills?, what personal characteristics make people interested in me?, who am I and what do I have to offer?, what's my greatest accomplishment?

and your own culture such as:

what National holidays do I celebrate and how?, when you speak to an adult, is it polite or rude to make eye contact?, do you have different forms of the word "you" depending on the context?, what age are you considered an adult?, do you give thanks before eating?, how important is punctuality?, how do you welcome visitors in your home?, who is the leader of your country?, what are the main religions in your country?, what are some interesting things about your country's history?, what are typical foods served in the culture?, are there any typical styles of dress?, how important is hierarchy?, how are gender roles perceived?, how important is the individual in the culture?, how important is the group?, what is the relationship between humans and nature? (e.g., do humans dominate nature? does nature dominate humans? do the two live in harmony?), what is humorous?, what is the role of luck in people's lives?, what things are considered lucky or unlucky?

Once you have started knowing better yourself and your culture by answering the previous questions, you will be able to start interacting with others but don't forget to:

- be emotionally intelligent and use all senses as valid information sources.

Ask yourself: do I get emotional in situations I don't understand and do I find it hard to understand the emotions strangers may experience?, do I try to pick up on non verbal communication signals?, are you able to foresee other's reactions based on their mood and personality?

- suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about your own culture.

Ask yourself: am I aware that stereotypes may influence my behavior?, if so, do I have a consistent strategy for moving beyond my stereotypes?, am I open to different ways of thinking, learning, behaving without being uncomfortable when I feel challenged or when my identity is questioned?

Now you will probably be able to summarize who you are in three words and even say if Hollywood made a movie about your life what the title would be! You will be building up a high degree sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, but you will also control your emotions, maintain your personal beliefs and identity when challenged.

You are almost ready to safely step into another culture but before don't forget to take step # 2

Step # 2: Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication goes far beyond the mere linguistic aspect. It is about communicating with people who have a different cultural background and who may interpret things differently. In order to communicate with someone from a different cultural background, as well as knowing the language, it is also important to know how one ought to behave in the culture in question and the motives for doing so. What at first is considered as strange, that is culturally different and leading to holding on to one's conventions, in an intercultural perspective is gradually turned into acceptance of the other thanks to decentring skills and the negotiation of new discourse rules to avoid or solve possible misunderstandings.

Useful quick tips to manage and improve intercultural communication are:

1. *Slow Down* (speak clearly and intelligibly).
2. *Separate Questions* (try not to ask double questions; let your listener answer one question at a time.)
3. *Avoid Negative Questions* (using negative questions and answers has caused many intercultural communication).
4. *Take Turns to talk* (make a point and then listen to the response).
5. *Write it Down* (write down the main points of the conversation for checking and understanding).
6. *Be Supportive* (encourage and inspire everybody to speak, no matter his or her level of English mastery).
7. *Check Understanding* (when communicating across cultures don't be shy: listen, then summarize what has been said, eventually, if necessary, ask additional questions).
8. *Avoid Slang* (if possible. Few people have a complete knowledge of slang, idioms and sayings).
9. *Make the Humour Appropriate* (use humour carefully, but never in a business context!).
10. *Maintain Etiquette* (being polite, respectful and well-mannered is a communication key in all cultures).

But tips alone can sometimes be ineffective: intercultural communicative competence needs to be developed in the direction of:

- understanding other people's concerns and motives
- building mutual trust.

¿QUESTION TIME?

To be sure you understand other people's concerns and motives ask yourself the following questions:

do I recognize that strangers with whom I am communicating may have different points of view than I do?, do I ever try to find culturally related reasons why strangers behave in a way I perceive as strange?, am I aware that there are different culturally related perceptions?, am I able to see the point of view of others? am I able to decode other people's communication according to their cultural background?

In addition you are sure you can manage to build mutual trust when you can answer positively the following questions:

am I able to adapt my behaviour to people from another cultural background once I know what behaviour is required?, can I deal successfully with ambiguous and conflict situations that are related to different communication conventions?

Now you will probably be able to entertain successful intercultural communication with your boss or a new colleague or even a potential foreign customer! You will be developing an effective communication tool to avoid misunderstanding or even conflicts decoding different cultures, behaviour and communication rules, but you will also set up the basis for mutual trust.

You are almost ready to safely step into another culture but before don't forget to take step # 3

Step # 3: Negotiating and influencing

During your traineeship, you may find that your opinion differs from that of your colleagues or your work placement supervisor. Discussing will involve the use of language, both verbal and non-verbal.

As you have seen in step # 2 when you are abroad, you are faced with intercultural communication. For that reason, it is important to influence your discussion partner or perhaps the situation in question from an international perspective and to use intercultural communication (see step #2).

How many times you'd like to know what's really going on in other people's minds? If only you could know it, you might be able to create the best outcome for yourself.

But surprise, surprise they are telling you all the time.... People always broadcast what they are thinking. The point is that sometimes you are not paying attention, or you didn't get it. By sharpening your senses and strengthening your acuity you will be able to notice even the smallest non-verbal information broadcast by the person you are talking to.

Competences which can help you manage intercultural situations are:

1. show sensory acuity
2. balance progress on objective with understanding other people's concerns and motive

Sensory acuity is the capacity that we have to be acutely aware through our senses (sound, vision, feeling, that sense of what is going on around you in the moment), whilst noticing minute changes in people in front of you. When applying your senses in a very acutely aware form, when noticing minute changes in people you are talking to, you can understand much more than what is actually said using verbal language. These slight changes indicate an unconscious response in them to your communication that you can use to influence the process of negotiation, especially in the presence of conflicts. So if someone is sitting in front of you and you notice the involuntary blinking of an eye, the widening of a pupil, the shift in breathing in a word, his unconscious reaction to what you are saying you can gain awareness of how effective your influence is and whether you are getting the results in your communication that you desire. You can recognize and interpret unconscious communication by noticing changes in posture, breathing, eye focus, skin colour and voice tonality. This is not only helpful to read people you are talking to, but also to become a more compelling communicator, supporting your own words with appropriate body language and tone of voice.

¿QUESTION TIME?

To be sure you are developing sensory acuity ask yourself the following questions:

do I pay attention to non verbal reactions of people?, am I dealing with and respond to potentially conflict situations that I don't understand?, do I take into account non verbal information and actively listen to my counterpart?, do I look for the best way to adapt my negotiating strategy to other cultures?, do I sense and read my counterparts reactions?

To be sure you are balancing progress on objective with understanding other people's concerns and motive ask yourself the following questions:

do I understand that values, norms and perspectives are culturally determined and may affect the way others negotiate?, do I still feel frustrated when I don't get the results I want in my own timeframe rather than searching for the best solution?, do I accept and work with different attitudes to time and deadlines?, do I consider setbacks as a matter of course when working with other cultures?

Now you will probably be able to demonstrate a good level of sensory acuity and a capacity to integrate others' concerns. You will start reacting rapidly and apply your best negotiation strategies at first in familiar and later working situations. As you will be growing more adaptable to unprepared objections or possible arising conflicts you will try to calm yourself and others down in high tension situations in order to make them more manageable.

You are almost ready to safely step into another culture but before don't forget to take step # 4

Step # 4: International leadership mindset

It goes without saying that you are responsible for your own learning experience. Being able to steer your own learning process whilst working in a different culture mainly involves knowing what you want and what you can achieve. To this end, it is important for you to be aware of your own personal and professional objectives.

Competences which you can develop:

- be personally responsible (accountability)
- empower and inspire others
- have a solution-focused mindset/be proactive

Working as part of a team means working for you individually and contributing to the overall team and its success. Being accountable, liable, responsible and self-disciplined together with proactive are the key factors for any studying and working experience. But how can you understand if you are an accountable person? As usual you can have recourse to introspective questions such as: do you set micro-goals (that is single actions that, when accomplished, serve as a building block to a much larger goal)?, do you make to-do lists?, do you reward yourself when you do a job well?, do you do one task at a time?, do you emphasize your strengths and work to improve your weaknesses?, do you seek feedback?, do you feel responsible if the results are good or bad?, do you tell the truth (trying to cover up a mistake only makes it worse)?

Most positive answers would tell that you are accountable, don't blame others or make excuses and procrastinate, you don't just do the minimum, you exceed expectations. You get things done. You like checklists and enjoy evaluating results. Unaccountable people are quick to complain and slow to act and you don't seem to be that kind of person.

¿QUESTION TIME?

To be sure you are personally responsible, that is a person accountable for, answer the following questions:

do I fear to make decisions and choices?, can I explain the decisions and choices I have made?, do I ask feedback about my work?, do I take responsibility for my own decisions and choices, even when the outcome is different than expected?, do I take responsibility for my own mistakes and use feedback to improve my work?

To be sure you are empowering and inspiring others answer the following questions:

do I give positive feedback/compliments to team members, do I think it is important to work in a diverse team?, do I take in account the difference between team members?, do I thank team members for helping me doing my best and for their efforts?, do I take advantage of the peculiarities of each team member?, do I contribute in creating positivism and enthusiasm for new ideas and plans in my team?, when I work in team, do I refer to different colleagues to ask for advice or capitalize their different qualities to help achieving the final goal?

To be sure you have a solution-focused mindset, in other words that you are proactive, answer the following questions:

do I try to solve problems before consulting others?, am I proactive in turning ideas into actions?, do I make clear decisions?, am I proactive in changing work methods, habits, etc.?, when circumstances change, can I make difficult decisions?, even when the outcome is unpleasant?, am I flexible still keeping the goals in mind?

Now you will probably be able to set your personal and professional goals, striving for continuous improvement and accepting feedback and failure as a learning opportunity. You are proactive both in looking for solutions and dynamically acting to motivate and stimulate the team you are working in, taking advantage of team diversity and multicultural situations as key solutions to working difficulties.

You are almost on the finish line ready to safely step into another culture This is you last struggle, don't hesitate and take step # 5

Step # 5: Creative entrepreneurship mindset

To stand your ground in a different culture, you need a creative, entrepreneurial mindset. This means that working in a different culture requires an entrepreneurial attitude. For example, this includes demonstrating persistence, taking the initiative to improve things, knowing what is going on and following developments in your environment. In brief, you constantly try to identify and seize opportunities! In order to do so, it is important for you to think creatively and be able to deal with ambiguities and/or ambiguous situations. This is because in a different culture you may often be faced with situations which in the first instance appear strange to you and which you may not be familiar with.

Competences which you can develop:

- think creatively
- tolerate ambiguity

Having an entrepreneurial mindset cannot be your style if you simply live your daily routine at home, but if you applied for a work placement abroad, it means that you have an entrepreneurial mindset. You show your readiness, you have the personality to go out on your own. The more questions you answer favorably, the more prepared you are mentally to begin your traineeship abroad. Are you a self-promoter?, are you a self-starter?, do you plan and organize well?, can you handle pressure?, are you comfortable with risk?, are you physically healthy?, can you work with conflicting personalities?, are you passionate?, are you encouraged by setbacks and/or challenges?, are you competitive?, are you optimistic?, can you handle criticism well?, are you patient?, are you decisive?, have you considered how the work placement abroad will impact your family/your friends and if you have their support?

Successful entrepreneurs have the following traits and you? How many traits do you share with successful entrepreneurs? Persistence, desire for immediate feedback, inquisitiveness, strong drive to achieve, high energy level, goal-oriented behavior, independent, demanding self-confident, calculated risk taker, creative, innovative vision, commitment, problem solving skills, tolerance for ambiguity, strong integrity, highly reliable, personal initiative, ability to consolidate resources, strong management and organizational skills, competitive, change agent, tolerance for failure, desire to work hard, luck.

¿QUESTION TIME?

To be sure you are thinking creatively ask yourself the following questions:

do I understand basic creative thinking strategies?, do I question the most obvious solutions proposed?, am I open minded towards new ideas?, do I use creative thinking techniques?, do I look beyond the given framework for new opportunities?, with some guidance do I search for some and suggest new ideas?, do I look for innovative solutions with long term vision?, am I active in creative new opportunities for improvement?

To be sure you can tolerate ambiguity ask yourself the following questions:

do I take events as they come, doing what seems right at the time?, do I accept complex situations and with guidance am I prepared to modify my behaviour?, do I often plan for different eventualities?, can I deal with unexpected events and unfamiliar contexts?, when ambiguous situations arise, am I comfortable that I can deal with them even when personally challenged?

Now you will probably be conscious that you need to be open and look for new ideas and ad hoc basis. You are increasingly setting deliberate strategies for innovation. Looking for alternatives and new possibilities will probably be your working code, your style in multicultural environment. Dealing with ambiguity is starting to tickle your way of working and dealing with different issues simultaneously will be perceived as demanding but not too distressing. You will be probably getting used to stress deriving from ambiguous and uncertain situations at a point that you are capable of showing no visible signs.

Eventually you are ready to safely step into another culture, you have developed skills in this area and you have got an insight into intercultural competences

Now the world can really be in your hands! Enjoy your work placement abroad!