

# The RA Manager

By Ira Asherman

## Management Training for the Multicultural Workforce

**E**ffective trainers come prepared. They arm themselves with the essentials: clear course objectives, an understanding of the people they are teaching and activities to engage them. These requirements are challenging under the best of circumstances. Add language and culture differences and suddenly a difficult situation can seem formidable for trainer and participant alike.

With a growing number of pharmaceutical companies are operating in facilities all over the world, and with the US population becoming increasingly diverse culturally, trainers need to closely monitor their audience and take extra steps where necessary to make sure their messages are getting across.

### Culture

The effects of culture are subtle and frequently difficult to comprehend. Culture is an intrinsic part of who we are, and it is imprinted on us from day one. It is by definition a broad and complicated concept not easy to sum up simply.

Management training consultants Joseph J. Distefano and Martha L. Maznevski point out that, "Cultural values and norms are deeply held and almost always implicit and taken for granted. Their deepest effects on behavior and interactions are usually hidden and extremely difficult to identify and address. Cultural differences inevitably hinder smooth interactions."<sup>1</sup>

Even when people have lived and worked outside their native country for many years, their formative years were usually in other countries. Their experiences during those formative years affect how they approach and respond to training. Cultural cues and values affect their participation, the nature of their questions, and, in general, how they interact with the instructor and with other participants. Because culture is so subtle, trainers may not readily appreciate the impact it may be having on the training experience. As Ernest Gundling, PhD, cofounder and managing director of Meriden Resources Associates, Inc., points out, "Learning styles and instructional methods are both deeply influenced by culture."<sup>2</sup>

### Language

Because it is the accepted language of the pharmaceutical industry, most training is conducted in English. Yet, many training participants do not speak English as their



primary language. This could create a situation that can significantly compromise learning.

I first became sensitized to culture and language issues in a program I conducted several years ago, when one of the participants told me during the break she was having difficulty following what I was saying. It soon became clear that I had been speaking too quickly and using too much jargon. I found that she was not alone. While most everyone speaks English in this industry, not everyone speaks the same English. Typical of the comments I heard were that American trainers talk too fast, use too many sports analogies and far too much jargon. Some said that American trainers do not fully appreciate how difficult it can be for someone whose primary language is not English to sit through a one- or two-day program conducted in English. Almost everyone had a story about how the use of English (or the lack thereof) had an impact on his or her participation in one or more training programs. Without exception, people said that it is far easier to participate, and to do so creatively, in their own language. This is a point one of my associates, Cass Bing, a principal in ITAPO Consulting, a firm that specializes in cross cultural training, has pointed out. According to Bing, it is more difficult to understand new materials and formulate responses when you are using a language different from the one you learned while growing up. She emphasized that even when we speak a new language routinely for many years, chances are we will not understand all of its nuances in the way a native speaker would.

When I asked participants whether they ever tell the instructor that they are having difficulty following what is happening, most said no, and indicated that would be an admission that their English skills were not good enough. This was not something they wanted to admit in public.

In addition, in many societies, addressing the instructor in this manner is seen as inappropriate, because it would cause the instructor to lose face. Management consultants and authors Mary O'Hara Deveraux and Robert Johansen captured the problem trainers face when they pointed out that,

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“Even with fluent second language speakers, it is easy to assume more understanding than actually exists. An exchange of words does not mean that everyone shares the same meanings and assumptions.”<sup>23</sup> The end result is that many do not participate at a level consistent with their needs and interests and miss valuable information that can help them better perform their jobs. The woman who approached me to air her view was really the exception to the rule.

Failure to incorporate factors of language and culture into how we plan and conduct training can only serve to cause confusion and misunderstanding—in the end reducing the overall effectiveness of our training programs.

### Suggestions for Trainers

What, then, should pharmaceutical trainers do to overcome the dual challenges of culture and language? Following is a list of suggestions I believe can make training more participant-friendly. These suggestions are based on my own experiences and conversations with other management trainers.

#### Culture

- Familiarize yourself as thoroughly as possible with the culture of the country you will work in, and talk with people who live or have lived there, before you start your training program. Asherman Associates has hired consultants to help us with cultural and language issues.
- Be aware of the cultural backgrounds of the people in your workshops. Different cultures can and will place different demands on you as a trainer. For example, if you are working with participants in a Germanic culture, you will find that people expect you to start and end on time and not to deviate from the agenda. People from Latin countries, on the other hand, can get very offended if trainers let an external time clock upset their rhythm or pace.

#### Translation

- Have the role-plays, case studies and exercises translated so that participants can check their understanding of the English version. Allow them to use the translated version as they prepare. Before any translation is done, though, review the material for slang and jargon; translate jargon that may not translate easily or accurately, for example, such phrases or words as “heard it through the grapevine,” “strike out” or “nifty.”
- Have a professional organization do the translation, but have people versed in the subject matter review the translation before using it. Translators often have difficulty with technical, scientific or discipline-specific language.

#### Time

- Allow participants extra time to read the materials. If 10 minutes is sufficient in the US, at least 20 will be needed outside the US. When possible, send certain course materials as pre-work. This applies both in international workshops, and in the US—whenever a significant number of participants do not speak English as their primary language.
- Closely monitor how long participants take to read the materials. Do not rush the group. Pay particular attention to people who are using dictionaries or constantly conferring with coworkers: They are likely having trouble with the written material and need more of your time and guidance.
- Take frequent breaks. Breaks help participants refresh their energy level and give instructors the opportunity to find out whether participants are keeping up with the material.
- If necessary and possible, take more time for the program. We have expanded several programs by as much as 50% to make sure that we could cover everything. If it is not possible to make the program longer, try limiting course objectives.

#### Language

- Allow small groups to work among themselves in their own language, with the only caveat that when one of the trainers joins the group, they must switch to English. We have found that people appreciate the opportunity to work in their own language and do not mind switching to English. This is particularly helpful when (as a large group) all of the other activities are conducted in English.

## Surveys and Videos

- If you use a feedback survey of any kind, make sure that it has been translated or that you have a second instructor who can help participants with difficult phrases and concepts. We use one survey available in French and Spanish, which has proven to be a real help. Many surveys are written for Americans and include phrases unique to this country; for example, a survey we use includes “try to soothe,” “a candid discussion,” and my personal favorite, “nit picker.” All of these phrases need explanation.
- Videos can be very difficult to hear and understand, so if you must use one, stop it frequently to confirm that viewers understand what’s happening. Before using any video, watch it several times to determine when and where you will stop, as well as the questions you will ask. Introduce each segment of the video with clear directions so people know what they should be watching for, and emphasize that you are willing to replay the video if necessary. Also, check that there is nothing in the video that people will find culturally offensive. For instance, one video we are familiar with includes footage that depicts the bombing of Pearl Harbor and its aftermath. Needless to say, we did not use this video in Japan.
- When conducting a program outside the US, acknowledge that you are probably the only person in the room who speaks English as her or his primary language. Urge participants to tell you if you speak too quickly or use words they don’t understand.

## Activities

- Send material out prior to the program.
- Use small group exercises. Many people who are uncomfortable talking in a large group for fear of exposing their perceived inadequacies in front of people they do not know will talk extensively in smaller ones.
- Monitor the small groups closely, because people may ask questions and share information that they will not share in the large group.
- When using role-plays, make sure everyone understands the concept of role-playing. Give a detailed explanation and demonstrate the process, if needed. If possible, conduct the role-plays in small groups. Never ask anyone to come to the front of the room.

## Staffing

- Use two trainers whenever possible. This will allow you to monitor the group more closely. Try to select a co-trainer who is fluent in the primary language most of the group uses.

- As trainers, you should be comfortable working with a multicultural group. Working with such a group will put additional stress on the instructor. You will not be able to utilize many of your customary stories and jokes. Furthermore, you will need to be much more careful with language and how you introduce and conduct your lectures, role-plays and small group exercises. The challenge can be extremely rewarding as you stretch your skills, but also very challenging.

## Lecture

- When delivering a lecture, keep it brief and speak slowly. Lectures can be very hard to follow and the longer the lecture, the more difficult it becomes for the participants. To make it easier, have a hard copy of your slides available, so participants can keep their note taking to a minimum. If the lecture is unavoidably long, stop frequently and encourage questions.

## Summary

In multicultural environments, trainers need to be prepared for the unexpected. The strangest situation my wife and I encountered involved two participants from two countries that had recently been at war. These individuals were now working at the same company. During our workshop they ended up in the same small group, but they would neither speak to each other nor work on activities together. Luckily, the group was able to take this in stride and use the experience in a useful and productive way—as several of them pointed out, this could happen back on the job.

The pharmaceutical trainer needs to be sensitive to the people in the group, their cultural backgrounds and their facility with English, if they want to be effective. Trainers also need to assess their own comfort level in working with a multicultural group. Failure to do so will seriously compromise the quality of training.

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## NOTES

1. Distefano JJ, Maznevski ML. Creating value with diverse teams in global management. *Organizational Dynamics*. 2000;29(1):45-63.
2. Gundling E. *Working Global Smart*. Palo Alto, Calif: Davies-Black Publishing. 2003.
3. Deveraux MO, Johansen R. *Global Work: Bridging Distance, Culture & Time*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1994.

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