Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss issues relating to cross-cultural awareness training in Australian organizations that send personnel on expatriate postings, looking at organizations from each of the government, non-government and private sectors. It fits within the business and international education stream of this conference because cross-cultural awareness and the provision of appropriate training is becoming a frequent part of preparation of personnel for expatriate work. The paper will be relevant to human resource managers, researchers and graduate students in business, management and education, and to cross-cultural awareness trainers and other conference attendees whose organizations have an interest in cross-cultural issues.

The paper contains a brief theoretical overview of issues relating to cross-cultural awareness and training and some conclusions drawn from my current research about the efficiency and effectiveness of the methods that are employed by practitioners in this field in Australia, including from the viewpoint of the trainees.

Paper

Purpose of Research

The purpose of my research is to investigate the practices and policies of Australian organizations in preparing personnel for overseas assignments.

A significant percentage of overseas assignments fail with some researchers assessing the figure as being in excess of 50 percent (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1995; Lee and Beaumont, 2001). Failure in this context is not just measured in terms of the employee not completing the overseas posting but includes a range of negative outcomes that affect the individual, the organization, co-workers and other stakeholders in the host country, as well as the employee's family. The ramifications of this are wide: the loss to organizations and companies of the resources they have put into a particular assignment; the potential damage done to the company or organization's reputation and goodwill in the host country including, in the case of government organizations, the damage to Australia's interests; the negative impact on an employee of having failed to measure up to expectations in the overseas assignment and possible ramifications for familial relationships; and, depending on the situation, the risk of the organization losing a valued employee's expertise and experience. Added to those assignments that fail dramatically enough for the employee to be recalled or to ask to be recalled are those assignments where, although the individual remains in-country for the intended duration of the assignment, the assignment fails to meet its objectives. These problems typically arise out of issues and difficulties related to cross-cultural encounters either in an individual's professional or personal life or both. Effective and thorough cross-cultural awareness training undertaken before departure from Australia with access to ongoing development once in-country can significantly diminish the risks commonly associated with failing to interact effectively across cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Bhawuk, 1990; Hughes-Wiener, 1995; Triandis, 2002).

Outline of Research

I am looking at a number of organizations from each of the three categories of government, NGOs and the private corporate sector. In the study of NGOs, I am not including intergovernmental agencies such as the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank or various United Nations organizations, although several of these agencies are common funding sources for the aid related work of the NGOs that I am studying. As well as comparing the organizational approach across and within the three categories, I am studying the effect of the training on individuals within the various organizations. After the initial contact with each organization, I
interview the person who has the responsibility for this area. Usually it is a human resources person but
often it is a director or manager of international operations. I discuss with them:

- the position of the organization in relation to cross-cultural awareness training;
- the style, duration and content of the training;
- the effect on an individual of failing to perform well in the training;
- the perceptions and experience of the organization in relation to the effectiveness of the training
  once personnel are overseas;
- the variation of training depending on seniority within the organization and type of posting to which
  they are going;
- the measures that are in place to support personnel while they are overseas (including in this
  spouses/partners and/or children);
- whether a failure to interact effectively and appropriately across cultures ever results in a staff
  member being brought home before the intended date and, if so, how serious the problem would
  have to be;
- which countries create the most issues for personnel in relation to cultural discomfort and difficulties;
  and, finally,
- the form of debriefing which takes place upon the individual's return to Australia.

Because very few of the organizations that I have looked at thus far conduct their pre-departure training in-
house, I then endeavour to interview the consultants who conduct this outsourced training about their
approaches to cross-cultural awareness training and how they design and implement their packages.

I am very interested in whether and how the people who receive this training feel that it helps them to
perform their duties better during the time of their overseas assignment and also what they think about its
efficacy in helping them to adjust to a new environment in their personal as well as their professional lives.
Consequently I interview a number of people from within each organization. The first interview takes place
after they have been selected but prior to their departure, the second after they have been in country for a
period of three or four months and the third either after their return to Australia (for individuals on short term
postings) or, for those on long postings, at the end of their first year. The interviews also seek to determine
the impact of the overseas posting on a spouse/partner and children, if any. Research indicates that a
significant percentage of those overseas assignments that fail do so because of family related issues (Hiltrop
and Janssens, 1995). To the extent that these issues can realistically be addressed by the employer, it is
obviously in the long-term interests of the organization to attempt to do so. In my research to date, it
appears that it is most commonly government departments and the church based NGOs who make an effort
to include spouses especially and, to some degree, children in Australia-based pre-departure cross-cultural
awareness training and also to offer family centred debriefing services on return to Australia.

Issues in Cross-Cultural Awareness Training

Cross-cultural awareness training as it exists currently covers a wide spectrum of activities ranging from a
half-day briefing to three or four week live-in courses. The obvious issues that arise when an organization
decides what type, style and duration of cross-cultural awareness training it is going to offer its members are
those of cost and time. However for practitioners in this area there are a multitude of other issues. There
is considerable debate about what works and why. A common method of attempting to assess the success of
a programme of cross-cultural awareness training involves self-reporting. This can be a problematic
procedure. In the late Nineties I conducted research at the Australian Defence Force School of Languages.
One of the aims of this research was to investigate knowledge about and attitudes towards Asia held by
military personnel who were spending a year as students undergoing intensive Indonesian language training.
A number of students from all three branches of the Defence Force completed a two-part questionnaire. The
content of part one of the questionnaire was designed to test general knowledge at various levels ranging
from simple or straightforward to quite difficult. The attitudes section sought to address attitudes to the
language course as well as to Asia and its importance to Australia, not only of the students themselves but
their perceptions of what their fellow Australians thought. One of the questions in the second section was
designed with the intention of ascertaining each student's assessment of his or her own knowledge of
Indonesia and other Asian countries both at beginning of the course and at the time of the implementation of
the survey. One of the most interesting results of this question was the revelation that self-assessment often
did not tally with reality as revealed by the first part of the survey. Quite frequently those students who
assessed their knowledge as being extremely high or very high were those very individuals who had
performed poorly in the general knowledge part of the survey. On the other hand, some of the students who
had performed very well in the first part of the survey, rated themselves very modestly and claimed that they
felt they had only a moderate or a low knowledge of both Indonesia and other Asian countries (Mehegan,
1998). Other issues around the difficulty of self reporting include cultural inappropriateness, problems
associated with excessive prospectivity or excessive retrospectivity and sometimes even deliberate obfuscation. Deliberate obfuscation is not always negatively motivated. People are sometimes driven by issues of modesty, politeness, timidity or political correctness.

There is even debate about what are the most desirable outcomes (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl and Osland, 2002). Most people would agree that a desirable outcome of a programme of cross-cultural awareness training is a situation wherein the individual moving into a foreign environment is able to interact and communicate effectively within that new environment and have experiences that are positive and fruitful for the individual, host nationals and other concerned individuals and organizations. Beyond that, agreement is not universal. There is the view that cross-cultural awareness training has done its job if it creates, encourages and enhances behaviour that is appropriate to the new setting. Others would disagree and say that a profound change within the affective domain of the individual is required to make cross-cultural communication truly effective. This raises questions as to whether acculturation and assimilation are required or desirable outcomes. Several of the organizations who are participating in my research would disagree quite strongly. Some managers have made the point to me most emphatically that ultimately their expatriate workers are in-country to represent the interests of their parent organization and, in the case of government organizations, Australia. They support the concept of their workers becoming people "who can be at home anywhere — people who can move between cultures fluidly and easily and possess an awareness and appreciation of all cultures" (York, 1994). What they do not want is the creation of workers who relate so closely and intimately to the new environment that the aims of the project become secondary to their newly lived experiences.

Current research into the most effective forms of cross-cultural awareness training has yet to come up with definitive answers (Bhawuk, 1990; Kealey and Protheroe, 1996; Gannon and Poon, 1997). The most common area of disagreement amongst practitioners and researchers occurs over the issue of culture-general versus culture-specific approaches to training. Culture-specific approaches are designed to prepare people for experiences in highly specified settings whereas culture-general approaches aim to prepare people for experiences that are common in a variety of cross-cultural encounters (Brislin, 1990; Cushman and Landis, 1996).

Some Preliminary Findings

Of the organizations and individuals that I have invited to participate in my research, obviously those that have accepted are ones that see cross-cultural awareness and the provision of appropriate training as valuable. Various reasons were given by organizations which declined to participate. Some indicated an inability to participate on grounds such as not currently having anyone preparing to go into the field, restructuring of their cross-cultural awareness training packages, being in the process of corporate restructuring or organizational policies that prevent personnel participating in outside research. Some organizations, however, declined to participate because they do not include any form of cross-cultural awareness training as part of their pre-posting preparation. Of this group some have said that they consider the failure to do so an organizational weakness and either that plans to introduce it were in the pipeline or that they hoped it would become an organizational priority at some time in the future. There were other members of this group, however, who said that their organization does not have it because it is not something that they see as valuable or necessary and that they have no plans to introduce it now or at some later date.

A pattern that is emerging is the frequent existence of a discrepancy between what the managerial team think they are providing for the employees who are going on overseas assignments and how individuals are finding the situation when they are actually in-country. Of the individuals that I have interviewed prior to their departure from Australia, most have been satisfied with the level of pre-embarkation training that their organization has conducted. A different picture emerges when people who have returned from their postings are interviewed, especially those who have had multiple overseas postings. Many of them thought that the training they had received was woefully inadequate to prepare them for the situations that they faced.

Whilst some individuals, and some organizations, thought that in situations where the choice to work overseas was a voluntary one, the responsibility to prepare oneself both emotionally and intellectually for the new environment was a personal one, most individuals who were experienced overseas assignees felt that the organization bore a responsibility to ensure that people going overseas to represent it were as well prepared as they possibly could be to cope efficiently, effectively and sensitively in the host country. They felt that this responsibility was owed to the individual employee, to the organization as an organization as well as to individual stakeholders connected with the organization such as donors, other employees, taxpayers etc and, very significantly, a responsibility to the people with whom they would be interacting in the host country. It was thought that this responsibility was too often approached very casually. Individuals who
felt this most strongly often did so because some agencies had given them the opportunity to undergo excellent cross-cultural awareness training with the result that the deficiencies of those that did not were thrown into strong relief. A number of people in this category worked in the development and humanitarian relief sectors. There was a feeling among such respondents that the emergency nature of humanitarian relief was sometimes used both by agencies and workers in the field to excuse a lack of commitment to cross-cultural awareness, training and appropriately sensitive behaviour. Managers that I have interviewed in this sector have, without exception, claimed a significant commitment to cross-cultural awareness issues as a core value of the organization. These claims have appeared sincere to me, which makes the views of the workers more interesting.

Many organizations say that perceived ability to interact effectively across cultures is as important, or almost as important, in the selection process as technical skills. However some of the respondents feel that in practice this is not occurring. Those respondents who have worked for agencies where they felt that a commitment to cross-cultural awareness training was a very serious one report high levels of satisfaction with their field experience and how much this has enriched them professionally and personally.

Although cross-cultural awareness trainers appear to offer either culture-specific or culture-general approaches, those trainees who have a lot of overseas experience and who have also, often, experienced a variety of cross-cultural training programmes prefer a combination of both approaches. The current trend of my research suggests that while individuals to be given the choice, they would opt for a package that spent at least a week, and preferably two or three (possibly in a live-in situation), where the emphasis was on a generalist approach to living and working successfully cross-culturally with units dedicated to specific-to-country briefings as well to prepare them as thoroughly as possible for their new undertaking.

References


