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When Australian trainers train overseas

By Pamela Thorne

Australian trainers who train in culturally different markets need to be aware of cultural differences, and be flexible to the needs of their audiences.

Have you ever read instructions that have been translated literally from another language? You might have been confused by such notions as these:

Case of fire, do your utmost to alarm the hotel porter. (hotel, Vienna)

We take your bags and send them in all directions. (airline ticket office, Copenhagen)

Stop. Drive sideways. (detour sign, Kyushi, Japan)

Jarring and disturbing as such mis-translated instructions read, so might your training appear to your offshore clients if you simply transpose the techniques and attitudes you use in Australia to an overseas venue.

■ Some true stories

A British trainer speaking in a conservative south Asian country made a joking reference to her divorce, and the fact that her ex-husband had not accompanied her on the trip. The room fell silent. Such self-disclosure, perhaps inconsequential in a Western context, was met with

embarrassment and discomfort by her audience.

A trainer used the term ‘out of sight, out of mind’ with a group of Russian trainees. The phrase was interpreted as ‘blind idiot’. Idioms and metaphors do not necessarily translate well.

An Australian trainer was puzzled by her Japanese audience who smiled politely as she began her presentation, then sat still and appeared to fall asleep. Afterwards, they stood and bowed, then left without giving her any verbal feedback. She only discovered later that it was the custom to leave it to the most senior person to speak.

At a conference in Dubai, three of the delegates were Muslim women wearing headscarves. During a coffee break, seated at a table with some of the participants, one of the British trainers lightly touched one of the women on the upper arm as they were having a conversation. There was an audible intake of breath around the table at this breach of etiquette. He quickly apologised, and was able to retrieve the situation.

■ Entering a different world

Conducting training successfully in another country means much more than flying in, staying in a fancy hotel, and delivering the same training as you would back home.

It means entering a different world with different values, different expectations, and different ways of doing business.

Brad Rilatt, of Active Management Services, talks about the three Rs when taking your training offshore: Relationships, Risks, and Rewards. For relationships, a vital activity is socialising after hours. It’s expected. “Even if you’ve been training all day, it’s important,” says Brad.

What about risks? Not having the resources to deliver on a requirement is one such risk. “There have been times when we just haven’t had enough people on the ground, so resourcing is a very important part of the business,” says Brad. Licensing is another issue: “If you’re using licensed training materials, check that you have a licence to use them overseas.” The third risk, Brad says, “is the risk of not being willing to adjust to different cultural expectations.”

The rewards, for Brad, have been enormous: “I thoroughly enjoy working with people in other countries, and seeing, feeling, and experiencing that rich variety of humanity.”

■ Preparation

Preparation before you leave is essential. Knowing common greetings is always a good idea when you travel, so make an

effort to learn a few words and phrases of the language before you go.

Joost Thissen from the Culture Resource Centre, which specialises in helping organisations operate in a globalised world, advises: “Trainers think they are well prepared if they have their *content* ready. That’s not enough. They also need to be aware of different styles of communication, learning, and delivery.”

Cherry Birch, of Melbourne-based Birch Consulting Group, has trained extensively in India, as well as other Asian countries. She advises trainers to learn as much about the host organisation, the country, and the market before leaving. “They will have done their research on you, so you need to be pretty well prepared yourself,” says Cherry.

Cherry also stresses the importance of the letting an offshore audience know about the trainer’s credentials and experience. She always provides a personal biography to be included in the materials: “They like to know your background, and it helps to establish your credibility.”

■ Bridging the comprehension gap

You will almost certainly need to modify your speaking style with an international audience. If using unfamiliar vocabulary, such as idioms or slang that don’t translate, your audience will become so preoccupied with translating what you’re saying to a context they can understand, that they’ll be unable to follow the content. The same goes for speaking too fast.

Some tips:

- A nod does not mean people agree or understand. It might merely mean “I hear you” or “I respect you”.
- Yes does not mean always mean yes. Give people the possibility of changing their minds if they are unable to fulfil an obligation.
- Don’t single out individuals from the group. Many cultures are very uncomfortable with Western-style individualism.
- Don’t expect to be on first-name terms with business contacts. In Germany, people might work together for years in the same company without being on first-name terms.

- Respect for more senior staff is essential to survival in many cultures. Team games where everyone is on an equal footing, may not go down well in such cultures.

■ Structuring your presentation

If your reasoning process is obscure, don’t expect that everyone will be able to follow you. Use a transparent structure that gives audiences a mental map of where you are taking them. Show an outline of the session, and how each part links to the whole. Back up any claims with source information, and explain why the point is significant.

Wrap up each section, and make it clear you are moving on to another “chunk”: “*So that’s all on the historical background. Let’s now move on to the present-day situation.*” Lead your audience to a logical conclusion. This

inductive approach, building your case slowly with specific illustrations, will gain acceptance from most audiences.

Brian Bowman spent nearly two years in the Philippines establishing call centres. He found that things that would never have worked in an Australian training room were great hits there. He used a lot of group activities, rather than requiring individuals to speak in front of a class. Often, he found, the participants would also voluntarily create a group song outside of training.

■ Losing face

To “lose face” is to lose dignity. It’s a social and psychological reality in many cultures (in Asia, and to some extent Latin America). Avoid making the other person uncomfortable or allowing them to lose their sense of dignity.

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The flip side of this is that your audience doesn't want you to lose face either, so they are unlikely to raise questions of a confronting nature, or tell you when something is not clear.

An odd corollary, according to Malcolm Dawes, Managing Director of dta WORLDWIDE, is that if the trainer asks a question and the participant answers correctly, the trainer can be seen to "lose face" – because the participant is then perceived to be "more knowledgeable".

Using emotion and theatrics

American and Australian-style presenters tend to be theatrical in order to engage the audience emotionally. In some cultures, such theatrics might be interpreted as gimmickry. From their point of view, business is serious, not a game. Your hosts will think you are not taking them or their organisation seriously if you are too dramatic.

Needless to say, high-energy, Tony Robbins-style entrances will probably not go down well outside of the English-speaking world. So season your enthusiasm with a good deal of fact.

Making an entrance

Australians like to laugh, and many trainers believe that presentations should start off with a buffer of humour. Attempts to make a business audience laugh in some Asian cultures, though, may not be well received, and could alienate them. Japanese audiences, for instance, expect a respectful approach, even to the point of telling them why you respect them so much.

This is not to say that you can't have humour. Just don't use it as your opener. Use it modestly and with discretion. If in doubt, leave it out.

Flexibility

If all this sounds like a lot, Joost Thissen (Culture Resource Centre) advises:

It's not rocket science. It just means tapping into new skills and being flexible in your approach. If you are ready to learn from the cues that the

learners are giving you, then you're already halfway there.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Training

Culture Resource Centre offers training in cultural intelligence:

www.cultureresourcecentre.com.au

Books

Khan-Panni, P. & Swallow, D. 2003, *Communicating Across Cultures: The key to successful international business communication*, How To Books, Oxford.

Morrison, T. & Conaway, W. 2006, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The bestselling guide to doing business in more than 60 countries*, 2nd ed, Adams Media, Avon, MA.

Overseas Business Opportunities

Austrade, the Australian government's export and business facilitation agency, has offices in 62 countries, and an established education and training network: www.austrade.gov.au

Pamela Thorne is founder of Viva Training, and author of *How much can a koala bear? A guide to commonly confused words*.

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