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DEVELOPING CULTURAL LITERACY THROUGH AN IN-CLASS GROUP PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

As the growth trend of foreign direct investment continues, American managers are challenged to develop their abilities to adapt to the new cultural environment. To that end, American business schools should help their students develop cross-cultural skills that are necessary to deal with people from different cultures. The purpose of this paper is to propose a cultural-learning project for business students to help them develop cultural literacy. Much of what students learned about other cultures through the project may not be found in reading materials. The culture-learning project provides business students with an opportunity to experience the details of other cultures through the establishment of a friendly relationship with member(s) of another country.

Keywords and phrases: International business, globalization, languages, culture-learning course.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world economy is becoming globalized, there is no longer a distinction between domestic and international business. Globalization is bringing people from different countries face to face with each other more often than before (Wild, Wild, & Han, 2003). Therefore, business success in the global economy requires managers to possess good cross-cultural skills (Ferarro, 1998).

Managers in international business are not only making, selling and bookkeeping, but also interacting with individuals and groups who have different cultural backgrounds. This adds a new dimension to the task of managers who are doing business in foreign countries.

Effective human resource management is another important factor for business success in foreign countries. Personnel functions and decision making in international negotiation require effective communication skills in foreign languages. Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it is a tool for gaining insight about values and attitudes. There are two types of languages: verbal and non-verbal. Non-verbal languages are complicated as they are the culturally determined cues, which vary widely between cultures.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURES IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Culture is pervasive in areas of business such as production, marketing and human resource management. Success in new markets is very much a function of cultural adaptability (Czinkota, 2003). People select products by design, style and color that are culturally acceptable to them. Studies have shown that the success or failure of a company in foreign markets depends on how effective its managers can exercise their cultural skills in the new environment (Ferarro, 1998).

To be successful in foreign markets, managers should understand cultural differences in terms of attitudes, values, religions, customs, education and language. People's attitudes vary because of cultural, as well as religious, influence. Asian attitudes toward authority and woman are quite different from those of most Westerners

Many areas of the world, such as Asia, South America, and Africa, highly value collectivism, while individualism is highly valued in America. Values towards time are different between Westerners and people in other parts of the world. Chinese, Koreans and Latin Americans are casual about time. Patience is a critical requirement for doing business with the Chinese. They frequently use a slow down technique as a bargaining ploy against Americans, realizing that they can exploit a normal American's tendency for impatience (Harris & Morgan, 1991). In the Arab East, the time required to get something accomplished depends on the relationship: important people get faster service than less important people (Hall, 1960).

A growing number of workforces in the world have already become culturally diverse. Economic integration and demographic shifts in many countries have changed the characteristics of the workforce, culturally as well as ethnically. Border-free European markets have created multicultural work forces in European business organizations. The U.S. workforce has already grown more culturally diverse. The 3Com Corporation's sprawling modern factory in a Chicago suburb employs more than 1,000 people who collectively speak more than 20 languages; it displays 65 different national flags, each representing the origin of at least one person who has worked at this company since its inception two and a half years ago (Aepfel, 1998). It was predicted by the U.S. Department of Labor that the total number of Caucasians in the American workforce would be fewer than the total number of Hispanics, Asians and African-Americans by the 21st century (Haseley, 1994). Many companies use teams as a strategy to deal with global competition and quality improvement. A global team is particularly popular in business. The HR Executive Review survey found that nearly 60 percent of the 90 companies in America used global teams either moderately or extensively (Axel, 1997). A global team consists of people from different cultures bound by common objectives. An effectively managed global team has many advantages, such as high productivity, a competitive cultural advantage, creativity and high achievement.

Lack of cultural understanding frequently results in many unintended mistakes, such as being culturally offensive, making cultural blunders, ruining personal relationships, failing in negotiation and consequently losing profits. Cultural incompetence, or inflexibility, easily can jeopardize millions of dollars through wasted negotiations, lost purchases or sales, and poor customer relations (Czinkota, 2003).

3. A GROUP PROJECT FOR CULTURAL LITERACY

It is imperative for managers to understand other cultures and to develop cultural literacy to be able to deal with a multicultural environment. Cultural understanding leads to greater tolerance for cultural differences (Ferraro, 1990). Cultural literacy is critical in the global economy.

Cultural literacy is defined as detailed knowledge about a culture that enables a person to function effectively within it, and it improves the ability to manage employees, market products, and conduct negotiations in other countries (Wild, Wild, & Han 2003).

One can acquire knowledge of other cultures through the process of learning. There are numerous ways of learning about a culture including the following: reading, seminars, studying abroad, traveling, and living with a host family.

However, studies found that people learn about other cultures more effectively through friends than any formal programs (Shattuck, 1965, Furnham & Bochner, 1982, and Galagan, 1990). It was found that one could experience the details of the host culture through the establishment of a friendly relationship with a member(s) of that host culture. One can learn better from a friend(s) because the person learning can relax psychologically with a friend, and thus a closer interaction can take place between friends. Peer learning has the effect of stimulating, motivating and positively reinforcing. As an application of the peer-learning concept, a group project, as a cultural-learning project, is designed for developing cultural literacy. The author has implemented this for the past nine years (1993-2002) in his international business class.

To implement the cultural learning project in class, students are required to follow the steps below under an instructor's guidance and supervision.

1. A group formation: Students are asked to form a group of three people at the beginning of a semester. Although the students choose the members of each group themselves, they are encouraged to consider different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and cultures.
2. Hofstede's four dimensions: The members of each group should have a complete understanding of Hofstede's four dimensions: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. femininity.
3. Determining data collecting strategy: Each group should come up with an appropriate strategy(s) to collect the necessary information. The group can use an interview, informal conversation, or time spent together playing sports, watching movies or other recreational activities.
4. Identifying a resource person(s): A group should locate a resource person(s), outside the group, from whom the group will collect the necessary information about the culture that the resource person represents.
5. Collecting cultural information: Each group should identify as many examples, practices or incidents that would substantiate Hofstede's four dimensions by discussing with the resource person about his/her country's custom, tradition, religion, social protocols, family system, education, business practices, etc.
6. Characterizing the resource person's country: Based upon the collected information, each group should characterize the resource person's country according to Hofstede's dimensions by providing the relevant examples of practices to substantiate each cultural dimension.
7. Non-verbal behaviors: Each group should learn at least three non-verbal behaviors from the resource person and be able to describe them.
8. A written report: Each group is required to submit two written reports: (1) a journal about the resource person by using the 4 Ws: who, what, when, and where: and (2) characteristics of the resource person's country according to Hofstede's dimensions.
9. A presentation: Each group is required to make an oral presentation at the end of the semester in order to share its findings with the other groups in class.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The cultural learning project is a semester long project. For the past many years, including the current semester, students have highly recommended implementing this project every semester. Much of what students learned through this project is not found in reading materials. Consistently for many years, students expressed the following as the general learning outcomes;

(1) they became sensitive to other cultures. (2) They understand and accept cultural differences among different nations. (3) They gained more knowledge about other cultures. (4) They had a chance to establish friendships with the resource people. These friendships enabled the students to continue to learn about the culture the friend's country.

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