

Cross-Cultural Training for Enhanced Adaptability

by Jasmine Duran - August 15, 2019

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Bridging differences sounds great. But, is cross-cultural training ever really effective? What does it take to help people adapt?

Most of us are familiar with the story of Alice in Wonderland. Alice follows a white rabbit down a hole and finds herself in a world unlike anything she's ever experienced. During her adventure, Alice is intrigued and overwhelmed. All at the same time.

She is offered strange foods to eat. She celebrates curious occasions like an unbirthday. She tries the local sports - croquet using a flamingo as a mallet and a hedgehog for a ball. The rules are bent so that the queen of hearts can win the game. Alice also encounters some interpersonal hiccups along the way. She offends a caterpillar by commenting on the inadequacy of his height. This turns into an unexpectedly heated confrontation.

Although Wonderland is a fictional place, Alice's experience in the foreign land is like the culture shock people often face when they travel abroad. There can be extreme differences between our own culture and novel places. In these situations, our brains are forced into overdrive in order to make sense of all the differences. And figure out how to adapt accordingly.

Is there anything we can do to prepare ourselves to adapt to new cultural surroundings? Could Alice have prepared herself for Wonderland?

Effective cross-cultural training could have given Alice a few skills to help her adapt to Wonderland a little more smoothly. For example, she might have received training to improve four key skills that are measured by a test of [cultural adaptability](#). The test is called the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory.

Target Skills for Cross-Cultural Adaptability

Emotional Resilience

Traveling to a new culture comes with a host of potential stressors. Emotional resilience refers to a set of skills for managing emotions in stressful and uncertain situations. Emotional resilience allows people to deal with their emotions in productive ways.

Flexibility & Openness

When traveling to new cultures it is inevitable to encounter situations or behaviors that are foreign and may go against our own value systems. Flexibility and openness help travelers suspend their judgment

when encountering such situations.

Perceptual Acuity

Interpersonal interactions in a host culture often have different rules and social cues. Perceptual acuity refers to the ability to read and adequately respond to social and interpersonal situations, including verbal and nonverbal communication cues.

Personal Autonomy

Finding oneself in a new culture can be disorienting. The awareness and preservation of personal identity can serve as an anchor or comparison point from which to understand a new culture.

These skills are important ingredients of [cross-cultural competence](#). How can cross-cultural training help build these skills?

Donna Goldstein and Douglas Smith found evidence that a special form of cross-cultural training helps develop these skills. And eases the challenges of adapting to new cultures. They published [their findings](#) in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

Goldstein and Smith had a group of international students participate in a week of cross-cultural training upon entering the United States. They compared the results with a control group. This was a group of similar students who did not participate in the training.

They found that the group who attended the cross-cultural training scored significantly higher on the test of cultural adaptability.

So how did it work?

Features of Cross-Cultural Training that Promote Adaptability

Goldstein and Smith found that experiential training was key. Experiential training focuses on learning by doing, combined with guided reflection. In Goldstein and Smith's cross-cultural training, students practiced the four skills by engaging in a selected set of training experiences.

Provide Opportunities for Interaction

During culture training, students had opportunities to interact with peers from other countries, as well as members of the host country. Students had the potential to practice encountering and dealing with the stress of interacting with their new cultural environment and people who are different from themselves. This provided students with the opportunity to build or exercise emotional resilience and perceptual acuity.

Set Expectations for Everyday Interactions

The cross-cultural training course used a variety of methods (films, roleplay, etc.) to teach students practical lessons about [what to expect in everyday social interactions](#) in school, work and social settings. The researchers hypothesize that this information reduced interaction anxiety and enhance flexibility, openness towards the new culture. In turn, this left students with confidence to continue interacting with cultural others.

Build a Habit of Comparing Oneself to Others

The course provided students with opportunities to compare themselves to their peers and members of the host culture. This allowed students to highlight their personal autonomy through experiences and reflections on their interactions, similarities and differences between themselves and cultural others.

Exercise Independent Thinking and Action

Cross-cultural training activities allowed students to incrementally gain experiences in thinking and acting in the context of a new culture. This experience may have helped them gain additional practice with emotional resilience.

Practice Empathy

The training activities required that students practice empathy. Students conducted interviews with teachers, peers and people on the street. This opportunity to think about [the perspective of cultural others](#) allowed them to develop empathy and perceptual acuity.

Working across cultures requires adaptability. Effective cross-cultural training allows people to gain experience by practicing key skills they need to adapt. It helps them more effectively live and work in a new culture.

Alice went down the rabbit hole with no preparation. Yet, her trip to Wonderland helped her practice some key cross-cultural skills. The kind of skills that would help any of us adapt to new cultures.

Image Credit: [Prawny](#)

References

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