

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

EXPERIENCING A FOREIGN CULTURE: A CROSS-CULTURAL SIMULATION

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ABSTRACT

In order to cope with the uncertainties of the 90's and beyond, current and future managers need to develop good global management skills. The purpose of this paper and the proposed presentation is to introduce a simulation called Ba-fa Ba-fa by Garry Shirts (1977). Through active participation in the simulated cultures, the participants are expected to personally experience the meaning of a culture and its impact on their own and others' behavior. Business teachers can use the simulation in management, marketing and international business courses to teach theoretical concepts like high and low context culture, masculinity and femininity of a culture, ethnocentrism, and individualism and collectivism. Businesses would find the exercise useful in preparing their managers for overseas assignments and in enhancing their managers' global skills. The paper provides details about the nature of the exercise and the procedures involved in conducting it. The significance of the exercise is established by using literature showing the need for better global management skills.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the global marketplace and opening of the Eastern bloc, have created challenges, opportunities and uncertainties that require Americans businesses and business schools to think differently in the 1990's and beyond. No company today can avoid the international business world shaped by international competition and collaborations. According to Lubin (1992) many global corporations are meeting the challenge by shifting the headquarters of their important business units abroad. AT&T, Du Pont, Hewlett-Packard are some of the companies that have used this tactic. Others are forming international collaborations like the one between G.M. and Toyota. No matter what the tactic or the strategy a business uses, they all require better global skills from current and future managers. According to Hymowitz (1989), tomorrow's manager "will have to know how to operate in any time, any place universe". While many companies on their own are training their managers to be "globalites" (Lubin 1992), the business schools as primary training grounds for managers have fundamental responsibility to help businesses in these efforts.

INTERNATIONALIZING THE THINKING OF FUTURE MANAGERS

The business schools have felt the push to internationalize their curricula in the past few years from both the industry and the accrediting agencies. As a result, most marketing and management textbooks have either added a chapter on international business or inserted examples of international businesses in them. Such changes, though helpful in creating theoretical significance of understanding international business and environment, cannot prepare a future manager to operate in international arena. In order to be successful, future managers need to personally experience the role and significance of cultures in determining their own and others' behavior. While living and traveling abroad are the most realistic ways to experience a culture, they are the most expensive and inconvenient ways as well. Also, actual experience abroad can be a failure if one is not properly prepared for it in advance. According to Tung (1987), approximately 30% of overseas assignments by U.S. multinationals result in failure. Expatriate's lack of cultural awareness was considered to be a major factor contributing to high failure rate of American expatriates.

What could be done to help reduce such failures? Making future managers more sensitive to the concept of culture and its influence on human behavior before they leave the country is obviously one way. Simulations and interactive games dealing with different cultures can be of great value in this regard. These simulations can be conducted with relative ease by businesses for their managers or by business schools for their students without incurring major expense. Finding meaningful simulations that actually leave lasting impression about the significance and impact of culture on the participant can be a challenge.

BA-FA BA-FA: A SIMULATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

The purpose of this paper and our proposed presentation is to introduce the readers and participants to an exercise or interactive game that allows them to personally experience the meaning of culture, its impact on their behavior and the behavior of others. Ba-fa Ba-fa by R. Garry Shirts (1977) was originally prepared for the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center in San Diego. An author of this paper has extensively used the exercise over the years with her students and with practicing managers. On the basis of participant response, we believe that it leaves a significant lasting impression.

In this game the participants are randomly assigned to one of the two cultures: Alpha and Beta. The Alphan culture is completely different from the Betian culture. A brief description of each culture is provided in Appendix I at the end of this paper. The participants are introduced to their respective new culture through the use of audiocassette and lecture. Alphans are a sexist culture with patriarchal structure, which values personal contact, intimacy and relaxed life style. Betans, on the other hand, are materialistic, selfish, greedy and driven by wealth. Once the participants understand their new culture and feel comfortable in their new roles, observers are exchanged. The observers try to learn about the values, norms, expectations and customs of the other culture and report their observations back to the members of their own culture. Each group tries to develop the most effective techniques for dealing with the other culture on the basis of the information provided by the observer. Following the discussion within the groups, members of each culture take turns at trying to live in and adapt to the other culture. When everyone has had a chance to visit the other culture, the game is ended and the participants discuss and analyze their experiences collectively.

The exercise should be conducted in the following manner:

1. Separately introduce each group to its culture and help it practice it. (Approximately 25 minutes)
2. Have the two cultures exchange observers (5 minutes).
3. Have the two groups listen to the reports and impressions of their respective observers (5 minutes).
4. Exchange visitors. (20 minutes; time may vary according to the number of participants.)
5. End of the game, debriefing and discussion (20 minutes). See Appendix II for possible discussion questions and Appendix III for some possible conclusions.

CONCLUSION

If the participants are students in a management, organizational behavior, marketing or international business class, their experience in the exercise can be used to demonstrate several theoretical

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Concepts that seem very abstract otherwise. The exercise is useful in explaining the concepts of:

1. High context and low context cultures (Krietner, 1992).
2. Monochronic time and polychronic time (Krietner, 1992),
3. Interpersonal Space or Public and Private Space (Luthans, 1992)
4. Individualism versus collectivism (Luthans, 1992),
5. Masculinity versus Femininity of a culture (Hofstede, 1993)
6. Ethnocentric problems,
7. Perceptual and Stereotyping Problems across cultures and
8. Significance of foreign language skills

If the participants are practicing managers, the same concepts can still be demonstrated but the emphasis is likely to be less on theoretical terms and more on the implications of these concepts on their and their business partners' behavior.

The authors have extensive experience with the use of this simulation and have used it in academia and in industry over the last decade. It is our experience that people remember their feelings and emotions related to the exercise even after several years. Even our colleagues who have taught international concepts found the experience to be meaningful and memorable when the simulation was conducted at a school retreat, which focused on internationalizing the thinking of its faculty.

In summary, the paper and the proposed presentation aim to provide the participants with a tool and the knowledge of how to use the tool in preparing the present and future managers to be globalites. The exercise discussed in the paper can also be used by the educational institutions to internationalize the thinking of its faculty by using the game during faculty retreats. As a result, it should of interest and value to managers, business faculty and administrators.

APPENDIX I DESCRIPTION OF CULTURES

Alphan Culture

The Alpha culture is one that participants have described as "touch, feely." It is a people centered culture, and patriarchal in nature. Some of the basic rules are that Alphas love to talk and laugh. Greetings and all social interactions involve touching or hugging. Since Alpha is a patriarchal society, men are honored and women are considered their property. Because of this, in a social situation, men may approach both men and women, but women may only approach other women and may not approach men; rather, men must instigate any interaction with women. Indeed, in the Alpha culture, the most honored person is the Patriarch, usually the oldest male participant. Many foreigners will recognize that the oldest person is honored, but fail to associate the gender as being significant. The benefit to the female, of course, is that the men in the Alphan culture will protect her from foreign males. To join in a conversation with a group of Alphas one should quietly wait on the edge of the group until invited in. This is done by a member of the group, who will give a gentle pat on the shoulder to the bystander

Alphas also love to tell stories, and this characteristic, more than anything else, should provide the clues for foreigners to properly interact with Alphas. All the stories should revolve around male family members: fathers, grandfathers, sons, uncles, and so on. Many foreigners pick up on the discussion of family members, but fail to recognize the dominance of males in conversation. Of course, discussion of mothers, sisters and aunts is considered socially unacceptable.

Alphas, being a fun loving people, enjoy playing a game called match the

leader." All Alphas have two different kinds of cards called Blimmers and Tibbers. The game is played by shuffling the cards until a particular male, designated the leader, stops shuffling. Then everyone show his or her bottom card. If the player matches the leader, the leader pays that person a chip. If the player doesn't match the leader, the player pays the leader a chip. If the patriarch is the leader, he always wins. The stress is on the fact that the money is far less important than playing the game. Indeed, the chips should really not be equated with money. Following a game, the conversation will continue it is not the winning or losing that is important to an Alphan, but rather, the social interaction involved in playing the game.

A third card called Stripper is also used by the Alphas. Its purpose is to show insult to someone who has offended an Alphan. This is done by simply holding up the card to the offender or including it in the game mentioned above. The use of a card to show insult is consistent with the rather gentle nature of the Alphas.

Betan Culture

The Betans are very different from the Alphas. Betans are goal oriented and are primarily a trading culture. Betans worth is based on how effective a trader he/she is. There are no gender differences and it is basically everyone for himself or herself. Since trading is so important to Betans, they have developed a special trading language which uses the five vowels (A, E, I, O, U), the first letter of six different colors (pink, blue, orange, yellow, white and green) and the initials of a person's name. Cards covered in numbers are the product traded among Betans. The most important aspect of these cards is that each has one number in all four corners; the goal of Betans is to collect, through trading, a complete set of one color of cards with the numbers in the corners running from 1 through 7.

Since trading is so important, it is the main activity of Betans, and encompasses all social activities. Speaking in English while trading is unacceptable and incomprehensible to a Betan. It is also well known to Betans that foreigners entering their culture are rich in 3's and 5's. (This is accomplished by the facilitator who arranges the cards distributed to the participants prior to the game) This sets up a situation where the foreigners can be taken advantage of, and can cause resentment in the poor Alphas coming to visit. Unlike the Alphas, then, playing the game and winning are very important to the Betans. Betan behavior focuses on this one aspect alone.

APPENDIX II PROBLEM/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ask the Betan members to give you words, which describe the Alphas. Write these on one side of the board without comment. Many of these words are likely to be pejorative such as "lazy," "friendly but cold," "cliquish," and so on.
2. Ask the Alphas to give you words, which describe the Betans. Write these on the other side of the board. Some of these are also likely to be pejorative such as "unfriendly," "greedy," and such. Issues related to stereotyping and problems associated with it can be addressed here.
3. Ask the Betans how the Alphas appeared to them when the Alphas visited the Beta Culture. They are likely to say they appeared naive, ready to be taken advantage of rich, and so on.
4. Ask the Alphas how the Betans appeared to them when the Betans came to visit. Aggressive, greedy, insensitive are words, which are often used to answer this question.
5. Ask the Betans to describe their feelings and thoughts when they visited the Alphan Culture. They are likely to say they felt left out, strange, bewildered or excluded. The concept of high context culture (Alphan culture) and low context culture (Betan culture) can be explored here.

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Ask Alphans to describe their feelings when they visited the Betan Culture. They often say they felt strange, taken advantage of, or bewildered.

7. Have each group explain itself to the others. Issues related to individualism (Betan culture) and collectivism (Alphan culture) can be discussed here. At this point masculinity (Betan culture) and Femininity (Alphan culture) of a culture can also be explained.
8. Ask members of each culture in which culture they would prefer to live and why. (If there are women who prefer the Alpha culture, you might want to ask them why they do when the rules discriminate against women). Issues related to Ethnocentrism could be explored here.
9. In the game, participants were not allowed to tell the rules of the culture. Ask them if there are situations and conditions in the “real world” which make it difficult to ask about the rules of another culture? Significance of foreign language skills and understanding of norms, traditions and values of a culture could be emphasized here.

On occasion, participants have dismissed the possibility of learning from the game because they think, “if I could have asked about the rules, I would have been able to do fine in the other culture.” This is not necessarily the case. Asking questions may be prohibited due to:

- 1) a foreign language or unfamiliar dialect;
 - 2) the fear of being considered rude if we ask about another culture’s values and acceptable behaviors;
 - 3) the members of another culture do not always “see” that their behavior is different and cultural values are not always evident to those immersed in the culture; (discuss Americans and their 18 inches of space and the Arab-American waltz, the issue of interpersonal space);
 - 4) the forces governing behavior in other cultures is often difficult to communicate: time, for example; (discuss in terms of arriving on time, early or late in the U.S.: the issue of Monochronic and polychronic time),
 - 5) knowing the language and customs of a culture do not overcome the feelings of being a stranger in a strange land. subtleties of another culture.
10. Ask participants if it is possible to talk about another culture without using evaluative terms? It should be, but it is difficult. Descriptive terms to point out differences in behavior is one way to overcome the evaluative tendency. Rephrase the comments on the board to be less pejorative.
 11. Ask participants if culture Z met the needs and aspirations of its members better than culture Y met the needs of its members, would culture Z be a better culture than culture Y?
 12. Ask participants if prolonged contact with another group increase understanding and appreciation between various groups?

6. It requires experience as well as study to understand the many subtitle’s of another culture.
7. Understanding another culture is a continuous and not a discrete process.
8. Stereotyping is probably inevitable in the absence of frequent contact or study.
9. The feelings which people have for their own language are often not evident until they encounter another language.
10. Perhaps a person can accept a culture only after he or she has been very critical of it.

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APPENDIX III. SOME POSSIBLE GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

1. What seems logical, sensible, important and reasonable to a person in one culture may seem irrational, stupid and unimportant to an outsider.
2. Feelings of apprehension, loneliness, lack of confidence are common when visiting another culture.
3. When people talk about other cultures, they tend to describe the differences and not the similarities.
4. Differences between cultures are generally seen as threatening and described in negative terms.
5. One should make up one’s own mind about another culture and not rely only on the reports and experiences of others