

## What makes cultural awareness training so different to other social skills training?

### How to select the right cultural training?

Should it be different from looking for a supplier for any other type of training? One would think not. However, searching for a supplier is often based on a number of basic assumptions people share when selecting training. One of these paradigms makes the search for **cultural awareness** training different. Another one has to do more specifically with buying culture shock training but will not be the subject of this article.

### A Different Paradigm

The main difference with other social skill training starts with the goal of the training and that relates to **what** you learn, the content, and linked to that **how** you learn this. After each training people are able to either feel different about something (values, attitudes), understand something they didn't understand before (norms, cognitive learning) or simply know something they didn't know (tips & tricks). All this can be practiced in training to make sure people are ready to behave in a desired way (behavior).

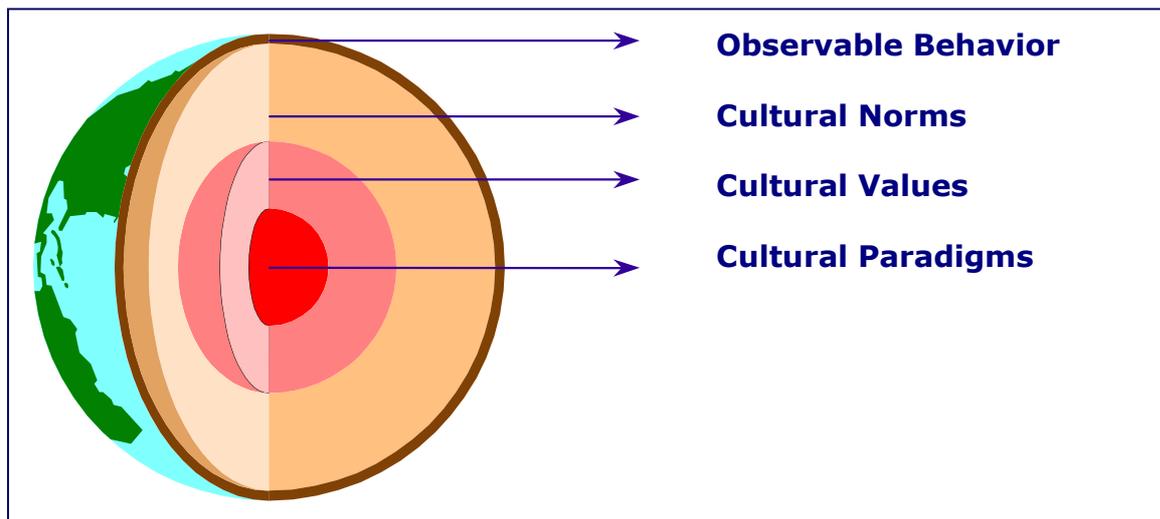


Figure: The 4 Levels of Learning.

General social skills training, like generic communication skills, typically starts with brief lectures or interactive exercises to discover (be more aware of) **existing values** among the trainees who more or less share the same paradigms. Paradigms are rarely discussed. The training will quickly move to norms (tips and tricks), the actual content of such training. Finally, a lot of time can be allocated for the attendees to practice the new learning.

In cultural training, we need to **dig deeper**. We need to discuss values and basic assumptions. And that takes time because you address deep-rooted beliefs and values.

Let me explain with a simple example why this is the case. If we apply a traditional approach to training for cultural subjects, we typically get training where people will learn how to give a business card in Japan. You need to take it in both ends, bow when you hand it over and make sure it is positioned so the person who receives it, who also takes it with both hands while bowing, can read your business card. This is unfortunately than trained in so called "cultural training". People stand up and practice this. Very interactive

but so what? Is this important. Agreed, to some extent it is! You don't want your American counterparts throwing their business cards on the table neither putting the ones of their Japanese guests in their trousers back pocket (on top of their ...). The French would justly call this a "faux pas".

But still, even if you do this right and you haven't upset your Japanese colleague, what have we really learned? Probably little and we might have just reinforced the stereotype that Japanese people have very "strange" traditions.

Cultural training should take these behaviors as subjects for cultural and not behavioral learning. Let's do some class here. Why do Japanese feel so strong about this business card practice? Think! What is so specific about Japanese culture? You probably already know that they value very much that each one is different (compared to the US where everybody is equal). It shows in their language. There is no word for brother but there is one for older or younger brother. **Nobody is equal**. The other value you must have heard of is that they value very highly the respect people give each other in public and does not doing so would lead to **loss of face**. Something to avoid at all cost. Thus asking questions the other person would not be able to answer would make that person also loose face. Japanese in business meetings will do the outmost to make sure the other person can answer all the questions they ask to make sure they don't have them loose face. Now, how do you know whether someone will be able to answer your questions? The Japanese business card! It says precisely (title) who you are in terms of your expertise and your decision power in the organization. The problem is that our Western business cards don't give that information. We are all managers of whatever it is we manage this quarter.

So, what have we learned now? We have learned that it is good to hand over the business cards properly but that will not help the Japanese to open up and be very communicative because our business cards don't tell them anything. So we need to spend enough time in the beginning of the meeting to tell exactly who we are, and whether legal or not in the US, your age will be very important (say in which year you graduated). If they find out you are 10 years older than your Japanese counterpart, don't be surprised you get a change in counterpart!

And we would need to still dig deeper ... Yes, why do Japanese feel so strong about everybody being different? Is that right? But I have to stop class here.

Clearly, the approach is different. Much more value discussions and case studies sustained with real life anecdotes will be the main dish of such courses. Interactive yes, but focused on paradigms and values, not tips & tricks.

## **Conclusion**

Effective cultural awareness training:

- Focuses on cultural assumptions – paradigms.
- Uses discussion and case studies rather than simulation.
- Uses observable behaviors as anecdotes to explain their meaning as how they relate to underlying values and assumptions.
- Teaches people a much broader and divergent pallet of behaviors to reconcile cultural differences.