



WHY DO SO MANY CULTURE PROGRAMS FAIL TO DELIVER RESULTS?

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Applying the model to your organisation

Read the following definitions. Decide where you would place your organisation's readiness to learn about Asia

1. Denial

An unwillingness to confront the challenge of Asia

2. Defence

The changes required are seen as a loss and a threat. The organisation risks becoming unrecognisable.

3. Minimisation

The extent of the challenge is played down, thus avoiding the need to confront new realities.

4. Acceptance

The need for new skills is accepted but there's inertia about actioning the first steps.

5. Adaptation

A willingness to move with the times and adapt – even in quite fundamental ways.

6. Integration

An energetic, future focus. New abilities are built, in line with a dynamic vision of the benefits this Asian century will bring.

A wake-up call about the importance of Asia!

This week, Barack Obama spent a brief time in Australia, immediately getting to the point of his visit. In his first remarks, he stated that the US now understood the implications for the global economy of this region's dynamic growth. Asia is set to shape the twenty-first century for everyone. In particular, the rapidly developing presence and confidence of China and India have altered forever the old assumptions about power, policy and strategy.

In this context, UGM is receiving an unsurprising increase in requests for development support. Astute clients are determined to build the cultural competence that they know will position them ahead of the pack in their sector.

Yet many of these conversations reveal an internal obstacle that will need to be overcome. At some stage in the past, clients have rolled out several 'culture programs' (usually as part of a previous diversity initiative) which were a dismal failure. They did not engage. They did not build insight. And, most of all, they did not deliver any practical business benefit. Now they want to have another go but internal resistance will need to be managed.

Does this sound familiar? You know your organisation is going to have to learn about Asia but there's a concern about the quality of what's out there to help. This briefing may illuminate the issues.

Useful content alone insufficient

An obvious problem in a weak program can be poor quality content. It might be dated, superficial or simply not focused on your business challenges.

But there is another, less obvious, reason why many culture programs fail to deliver on their promise: weak methodology. This is a complex area, touching as it does on each person's social identity and challenging long-cherished ideas about how things *should* be done and how people *should* behave.

For example, research consistently shows that there is a continuum of personal growth that can be used to diagnose someone's level of intercultural sensitivity or 'readiness'. Program design needs to take this into account. In addition, our research over many years has shown that similar development stages also apply to organisations.

Why do people vary so much in their readiness?

You don't respond directly to events – but rather to the meaning you give them. These meanings tend to be influenced by the cultural values and norms that surround you as you grow up. Each person can be influenced to conform by social factors largely outside their conscious awareness. This is an essential part of a child's socialisation into their

culture. Indeed, experiments conducted in a range of countries show that people will go to extraordinary lengths to maintain their group memberships, particularly when behaviours are legitimised by peers or authority figures. In this sense, cultural sensitivity isn't natural for the majority of people in any society. In fact, the development of this ability can demand new insights and new attitudes.

Denial

In view of the power of the socialisation process, it's natural that the first stage is the denial of difference. This describes a person's position where they see their own world view as universal. It's a narrow parochialism where any cultural differences that can't be excluded from awareness are attributed to a less developed status.

Defence

Now differences are acknowledged and accorded some meaning, but they're experienced as threatening. Undesirable qualities are attributed to cultural outsiders. This is expressed in the form of negative stereotypes. The person's own culture is seen as superior.

Minimisation

At this stage, people try to maintain the central position of their own world view. Yet it's an advance that cultural differences are recognised and accepted. At the same time, these differences are dismissed as superficial in comparison with what is thought to be universal and innate in all human beings. Thus people believe that their own regular way of doing things will carry them through. In fact, this is deeply ethnocentric. It assumes other people's norms must be the same as one's own.

Acceptance

Now cultural differences are accepted as pervasive and fundamental. This marks a major shift. In general, the first area to be accepted is differences in behaviour. Then comes acceptance of what is behind these – deeper differences in value systems.

Adaptation

This is the first stage of professional effectiveness since now people are able to adapt their behaviour. They can shift their usual frame of reference to accommodate someone else's reality. This is a form of empathy and from this base such people are able to learn new ways of doing things.

Integration

At this final stage, people are able to evaluate situations differently depending on their cultural context. Difference is experienced as basic and an enriching part of life. Such people often act as cultural mediators, explaining one group to another.