

Intercultural Work Competence

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Introduction

A good amount of research has been published on personal factors accounting for adaptive or efficient performance in intercultural work settings. These studies have yielded a commonly accepted set of characteristics that serve as guidelines for recruitment purposes. But, instead of personal characteristics, a more fruitful approach is offered by behavioural competencies. Competencies, as desirable sets of behaviours in a given job provide “roundtables” for all work improvement efforts. A set of two plus one broad competencies is suggested, addressing work improvement in recruitment, training, leadership and performance processes in intercultural work contexts. The proposition is to move from emphasis on cultural differences to emphasis on commonalities in people processes in order to enhance intercultural exchange in the ever globalizing world of work.

Three to four broad personal characteristics

There has appeared a small plethora of research on performance and adaptation of individuals working in intercultural settings. This research has sparked equally vivid development of assessment instruments and today there are almost ninety single assessment tools available (Fantini, 2005). Reviews on intercultural success tend to concur on the personal characteristics that stand out as beneficial for adaptation and performance in a wide array of intercultural work settings.

Hammer and colleagues (1978) used factor analysis to identify three main “personal ability” dimensions underlying cross-cultural success: ability to deal with psychological stress, ability to communicate, and ability to establish interpersonal relationships. Gudykunst and Hammer (1984) presented a very similar tripartite division of personal factors accounting for success in intercultural settings. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) reviewed both predictors and performance in acculturation and summarized the criteria along three areas: self, relationship and perceptual orientations, each organized further into sub-dimensions. Cui and van den Berg (1991) conceptualized intercultural effectiveness as a second-order factor comprising three dimensions: communication competence, cultural empathy, and communication behavior. Arthur and Bennett’s survey (1995) focused on people moving from and to a diverse range of countries, assigned to a variety of jobs. Their list of important topics included job knowledge and motivation, family situation, flexibility/adaptability, relational skills and extra-cultural openness. In his review, Daniel Kealey (1996) presented motivation, communication, flexibility, empathy, respect, tolerance for ambiguity and self-confidence as consistently confirmed personal resources for cross-cultural success. Finally, Niitamo (1999) reviewed the literature specifically with regard to evaluation of individuals applying to “overseas” jobs and work positions, see also Holopainen & Björkman (2005).

It may be summarized from the above that, despite terminological differences, there appears from three to four broad personal factors important for intercultural work effectiveness. Perceptual and attitudinal factors appear often in reviews with reference to terms such as perceptual orientations, tolerance of ambiguity and cultural empathy. Social interaction and communication also appear as

important preconditions of success in almost all the reviews. Thirdly, the ability to withstand or handle stress appears as a factor enhancing intercultural adaptation or “acculturation”. The fourth broad category of personal factors is composed of miscellaneous personality and behavioral traits exemplified in terms such as self-confidence, flexibility, respect, etc. While personal characteristics serve as useful checklists in recruiting people to intercultural work settings, they fail to provide guidelines for how to influence the behaviour processes involved in intercultural work.

Competencies as roundtables to work improvement

The concept of competency contrasts to personal characteristics in its emphasis on situation-sensitive capacities and behaviours performed in predefined contexts (e.g., McClelland, 1973; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Sandberg (2000) distinguishes between worker-oriented and work-oriented approaches to competence. The former views competence as composed of attributes possessed by workers, typically represented as knowledge, skills, abilities and other personal (KSAOs) attributes required for effective performance. In the latter approach, important task activities are first identified and then transformed or otherwise related to worker attributes, e.g., ability to inspire others. Competency is here defined simply as a set of activities (behaviours and cognitions) that the individual (or workgroup) should master for adequate or superior performance in a given task, job or problem situation.

In addition to emphasis on actual behaviours performed in a given job or job family, the competency concept underscores their multi-element structure. For example, not only is it necessary to have a skill to do something, one should also possess motivation to perform the task. Or, strong motivation to do something is rarely enough to fulfil a task, knowledge is also needed to reach a satisfactory performance level. Another conceptual tenet proposed here is to distinguish between competencies and their regulatory or “driver” processes (Nederström & Niitamo, 2010). Such driver-outcome distinction makes the still vaguely understood concept of competencies tangible and more understandable. The view of competencies “driven” by motivational, thinking and attitude processes brings more leverage to all work improvement efforts as the focus of change efforts can be targeted on either the driver or outcome end of a competency.

Despite of the various conceptual perspectives on competencies, the shared emphasis on actual behaviours makes competencies the premium choice for integrated work improvement efforts. From the work organization’s perspective, competencies indicate such valued and recognised behaviours which to promote and reward in recruitment, training, leadership as well as performance management. Competencies serve as hubs or “roundtables” for all work improvement efforts. Selection, training and development, coaching, leadership and performance management can be coordinated with a common competency concept which greatly increases manageability of planning. Workers are provided with sets of objectives which to work towards and are clear about how they are expected to perform their tasks.

Two plus one intercultural work competencies

All the single but often overlapping and interrelated personal characteristics in the previous reviews were summarized into the three to four broad categories of perceptual-attitudinal, interaction-communication, stress management and miscellaneous factors. Three behavioral competencies were delineated upon these categories. The goal was to define a set of competencies vital for success in all work situations that involve essential intercultural exchange. This would cover anything from

work accomplished in multicultural work teams to situations involving people moving to work in foreign culture environments.

Handling ambiguity-diversity

Handling ambiguity-diversity appears an obvious formulation for a perceptual-attitudinal competency in intercultural work settings. Exposure to new cultures always involves perceptual challenges, as newcomers to previously unfamiliar cultures are bombarded with ambiguous stimuli and meanings upon which they must make sense. Broad perception, a tendency to look at things in an abstracting way enables to relate disparate things together and understand new information. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that broad rather than narrow perception enhances understanding and handling of ambiguity and diversity.

Tolerance of ambiguity appears often in studies of intercultural effectiveness and acculturation. The term was introduced in *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950), the classic volume on Nazi mentality drawing upon radical exclusion of ethnic or otherwise diverging groups of people. Ambiguity tolerance is defined as the ability to perceive ambiguity in information and behavior in an open way instead of resorting to defensive attitudes. This means that intercultural exchange would be better enhanced through adoption of curious and positive rather than negative and defensive attitudes towards ambiguity, novelty and change. Therefore, it may be summarized that intercultural exchange benefits from efforts to perceive the world in a broad, holistic manner and efforts to develop positive curiosity towards new cultures and experiences.

True cooperation

Interaction and communication are the founding of intercultural exchange. However, it is suggested that these somewhat esoteric terms be replaced with the tangible common sense term of cooperation. Cooperation summarizes the same critical elements while molding them into goal-oriented form. “True” cooperation may be evaluated by observing performance in its three sub-processes: creating and keeping up contacts, advising and supporting others and serving and listening to other people (Nederström & Niitamo, 2010). These sub-processes can be used to differentiate between different intercultural work settings. For example, contact creation may be of pronounced importance in international business while advisory processes may be in high demand in aid and assistance type of work. Therefore, it may be summarized that intercultural exchange benefits from genuine efforts to cooperate with others, whether it be creating contacts, supporting others or listening to other people.

Coping with stress through interaction with others

The third broad competency concerns people who are moving to new cultural work and life environments. Moving to live and work in another culture will almost invariably cause at least some emotional stress experiences. The more distance to one’s own cultural environment, the more stress may be expected. The term “culture shock” was introduced by Kalervo Oberg in describing experiences of people moving to live and work in foreign countries (Oberg, 1960). Accordingly, culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. Oberg went so far as to name culture shock an occupational disease that consists of a sequence of experiential phases along sojourns to foreign cultures.

The studies and reviews on personal factors predicting acculturation speak of “low stress” individuals. The problem is that an overall ability to withstand stress is not an established construct in general psychology, very few such people really exist. Of course, when personnel professionals speak about stress tolerance they have in mind a particular set of stressors in a given target job, e.g.,

operative time pressures, health and security risks or interpersonal conflicts. But instead of an esoteric personal characteristic, a much more fruitful approach is to focus on the ways people tend to cope with stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

Coping with stress can be said to comprise five strategies or styles: direct action, interaction with others, rational analysis and planning, detachment from the stressor and focusing on self. It is proposed that interaction with others, i.e., asking for, and accepting support from others, emerges as prime means of dealing with stress in intercultural work contexts. The fact that the newcomer's all activities, particularly in the beginning phase, depend on interaction with host culture representatives would make interaction a critically important way of coping with stress for sojourners.

Towards common sense concepts in intercultural exchange

Anthropological concepts emphasizing cultural differences have heavily influenced the discussion of intercultural exchange. The empirical research tradition of acculturation originates from the experiences of westerners sojourning to "exotic" cultures. The "us and them" mentality that emanates from Europe's colonial times still echoes in these studies. Instead of facilitating true intercultural exchange, such an approach carries the risk of erecting glass walls between members of different cultures resulting in an aquarium-like situation between members of the observer and observed culture.

What is proposed here is a change of perspective to common sense, or if you will, socio-psychological concepts that draw upon universality of the human condition. With emphasis on commonality between people from all cultures, the common sense perspective should be more functional in enhancing intercultural exchange. Perhaps cultural differences in regard to intercultural exchange are not as profound, exclusive, dichotomous and dramatic as has been thought previously. Developmental psychologists talk about "biculturalism" as a natural strand in human development and they view, for example, bilingualism as a competency rather than a problem (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). In the same vein, biculturalism theory (LaFromboise et al., 1993) lays out the notion of being able to function competently within two cultures, without loss of original cultural identity or feelings of having to choose one culture over another. The theory rejects many of the dichotomies implicit in previous conceptualizations of acculturation.

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