A PERSONALIZED ACCOUNT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL

INTRODUCTION

This article provides examples of intercultural competence development in a multicultural organization in Nepal. The examples, in a small way, help to paint a picture of what intercultural competence development – my own and others' - looks like. I present the examples within the form of a letter from me to some people with whom I worked in Nepal when I was the Director of Training for the U.S. Peace Corps program there some years back. The context here is Peace Corps, a governmental volunteer agency. I think you will be able to see the parallels with global corporations' journey through intercultural competence development and that mine and my Nepali counterparts' challenge and experience were much the same as managers and staff in a corporate global organization.

NEPAL CONTEXT

Even though I had never been a Peace Corps volunteer, I knew many people who had, so I was already basically familiar with the Peace Corps volunteer training model. At the time I was working for Peace Corps, Nepal was the largest Peace Corps program in the Asia-Pacific region. At any given time there were approximately 175 – 200 volunteers posted around the country. I spent more than three years there and it was a formative experience for my own intercultural competence development and my role as a facilitator of others' development. I learned mostly from my own mistakes and failures – feeling a range of emotions – often hapless and/or helpless, frustrated of course, stupid certainly, confused for sure, childlike very often as Hofstede has noted, and totally inadequate at times. These are great conditions for learning and improving performance.....

While there were a variety of volunteer training programs throughout the year, the three-month long pre-service training program was the largest and most significant for us in the training department. The following were the key elements of the Peace Corps volunteer pre-service training model:

--Volunteers were all brought to their host country for three months of full-time pre-service training before being sworn in as a volunteer in that country. Volunteers ranged in age from recent college grads to retired professionals in their sixties and seventies. In Nepal the average number of pre-service volunteers in any one group averaged around 30 to 40.
--Training program components included immersion language training, technical training, intercultural skill training, and health and safety training. During about half of the 3-month training period, the volunteers-in-training lived with a host family in a village or small town. We had training sites dispersed throughout the country. Some training sites were quite remote in the Himalayan kingdom – as it was at that time - with access only by air.

> Nepal is not a kingdom anymore. While I was there the Maoist rebellion in Nepal was in its middle stages and a few years after I left, Peace Corps had to shut down the program nationwide because of the high level of violence. I was fortunate to be in Nepal for a consultancy at the Ministry of Education some years later when the rebellion resulted in the king stepping down and a parliamentary government being formed. This was in 2006 and perhaps you may have seen it covered on CNN. Martial law was in place during the last three weeks before the king abdicated. The only way I could learn of the movement's activities was by watching CNN. On the day after the king stepped down and martial law ceased, Kathmandu's bus stations and roads were clogged with tens of thousands of people eager to return to their hometowns and villages in the countryside where there had been too much violence for them to visit during the rebellion. I had friends who hadn't visited their hometown for several years. It was very emotional and the country was immediately filled with optimism and relief that the fighting of this long war was over.
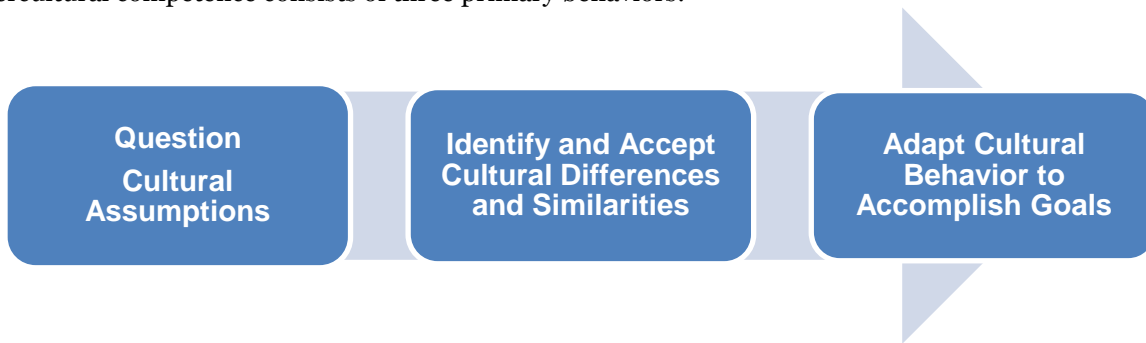
--Each project required a large project management and training professional staff. For each three-month project, the number of staff was near the same number as that of the volunteers-in-training. Most of the project staff were Nepali. We usually had a few Indian folks and maybe two or three past American Peace

Corps volunteers on the training staff. The volunteers-in-training were typically not very interculturally competent and so it was incumbent upon the Nepali staff to be able to work with Americans within their own cultural context. This also meant that it was incumbent upon me to work with the Nepali staff within their own cultural context so that I could facilitate their intercultural competence development. My role was to direct and develop the Nepali training staff. My primary internal clients were six Program Managers – four Nepalis and two Americans. The largest program in Nepal was Education. Volunteers taught math and science – all in Nepali language of course. Other programs included Forestry, Agriculture, Community Health, Youth Development, and Water and Sanitation.

WORKING DEFINITION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The following provides a simple working definition of intercultural competence for the purposes of reading this article:

Intercultural competence consists of three primary behaviors:

Question Cultural Assumptions	Identify and Accept Cultural Differences and Similarities	Adapt Cultural Behavior to Accomplish Goals

The path to fluent intercultural competence generally follows a progression from left to right in the above graphic. One thing I learned in Nepal, and from my two previous expat experiences, was that developing the first two competencies is a pre-requisite to the more advanced competency of adaptation. Grouped within each of the three competencies are a number of specific intercultural skills. The highlighted skill of this article is Cultural Attribution, one of the key skills comprising the middle competency. Cultural attribution skill is the ability to de-personalize intercultural interactions and reserve judgment by attributing behavior to cultural influences. The letter itself reflects this skill and the examples in the letter largely have to do with cultural attribution skill being applied.

Intercultural competence development, including cultural attribution skill, is a result of two conditions being met:

1. Extensive interaction with intercultural counterparts
2. Structured intercultural learning inputs facilitated by someone who is already interculturally competent. I had spent two years working in Japan and two years working in the Philippines prior to working in Nepal. While I had learned a lot and had great experiences, my intercultural competence level was still relatively low. I didn't know it at the time but it was because I had never had any structured facilitated intercultural learning activities to help me make meaning of all of the experiences I had. When I arrived in Nepal, I thought I knew a lot about working in other cultures, but to put it plainly, "I didn't know nuttin' 'bout nuttin'."

I met a lot of foreigners in Nepal who had formed a life-long relationship with a Buddhist teacher, usually one of the many Tibetan Buddhists who had emigrated to Nepal. They would explain to me that true consciousness-raising couldn't be achieved alone, that it required a teacher who already had the targeted higher level of consciousness. The old adage of "not knowing what you don't know" applies here. There is a parallel here with intercultural competence development; it needs facilitation by someone who has already reached a higher level of intercultural consciousness/awareness and behavioral competence. A woman from South America with whom I had an intercultural coaching relationship referred to

consciousness-raising in her own words: "I learned something about myself that I didn't even know it [sic] existed."

Well, in Nepal I learned a ton of stuff about myself and other cultures that I didn't have a clue it even existed. If the ability to fail is crucial to intercultural competence development, I couldn't help but develop that ability with all of the failed interactions I experienced.

LETTER TO THE NEPALI TRAINING STAFF

Letter to Pradip, Prashant and Sameer – three of the training management staff who reported to me. This letter was sent about a year after I left Nepal. There is a de-brief of the letter's implications afterward.

One caveat – I did not write this specific letter to the Nepali staff. All of the events and actions described in this letter did indeed happen. However, this particular letter is a synthesis and integration of letters I wrote during that first year after leaving Nepal. I have placed section headings in this letter transcription to organize it for you the reader. In the actual letters I sent to Nepal, I didn't include section headings.

Greeting, Evidence of Intercultural Competence, Cultural Guides

Dear Pradip, Prashant, and Sameer,

Namaste

I hope you are doing well. It has been too long since our last communication. I am writing now to ask for news from Kathmandu and to respond to Sameer's recent email to me in which he wrote:

I think now of all the things we started when you were here and we continue to develop intercultural skills – most importantly, staff are very independent and comfortable taking risk now a days [sic]. Do you know that now in the Annual Training Review meeting when we discuss new initiatives for the coming year, it is not only the senior staff bringing up new ideas.

Sameer's words made me happy and were very encouraging to me. Recently, I also have been thinking about our time together and how much I learned and enjoyed it. You all worked extremely hard and persevered over time with a very complex effort – developing intercultural competence. Sometimes I was a bit discouraged myself. I remember when our past project director Sanjay came to my office after some of our workshops and discussions on increasing the ability to take risks. He was very excited and said that he had the answer for helping staff to take risks. As I listened carefully he said, "The staff would be able to easily take risks if they knew they weren't going to fail." While I appreciated his thoughts and analysis, it made me realize how far we had to go on the risk matter. It also made me realize how cultural values influence conceptual thinking.

As the three PC/Nepal training project directors and my direct reports you heavily influenced the organizational improvement of the training program, your own and your staff's skill development, and the volunteers' development, especially their intercultural competence development. This ultimately better enabled them to influence change and development in their villages and communities.

In particular, your role as my key cultural guides was excellent. During my early days, your advice helped me to adapt my management and leadership styles to use more ascribed-status value driven behaviors rather than achievement-status behaviors, including:
--taking time to better establish relationships based on relationship oriented behaviors rather than task driven or contract driven behaviors
--taking on more of a mentor role and paying more attention to the monitoring function with you guys and others, including Shanti [my assistant at the time]. I still remember her comment to me was a shock - "Patrick ji, I didn't think you liked me because you never corrected my work."
--using a directive leadership style rather than an empowering style.

--graciously accepting (at least trying to) the deferential behavior toward me by you and your staff based on my status as the *hakim*.
--paying more attention to yours and the staff's personal lives.

Cultural Attribution, Establishing Credibility, Intercultural Competency Training

You also helped me to understand the value you have on collectivism over individualism. I always appreciated your critical feedback to me when I would give my individual opinion when a question was posed to the group. Another aspect of collectivism you helped me to understand was why all of the panel members during our panel discussion learning activities were always trying to come to a common agreement while the typical individualist purpose of a panel discussion is to share a variety of perspectives in order to increase understanding.

As I adapted my behavior, I started to gain trust, respect and credibility as the leader. Once that was established we were better able to all work together to make the necessary changes toward better achieving the objectives of the training program – changes that included many cultural behavior adaptations on your part. That was when you and the staff began to adapt some of your behaviors toward greater independence, ability to take risks, and egalitarian behaviors with both me and the volunteers – you stopped trying to solve the volunteers' problems for them and became great at helping them to solve their own problems.

Remember how we started holding staff development workshops to help you and all of the staff develop new skills that would help you to support volunteer independence rather than dependence on you and the Peace Corps "umbrella"? We used to do those scripted skits where I would give one of you the lines to use in responding to a volunteer coming to you with a problem. The volunteer character in the skit would say, "I am having a problem with my host family." Up until then at the training sites, it would have been common for you to talk to the host family yourself on behalf of the volunteer. I would ask the staff person in the skit to respond by reading the line on the paper I had given him/her – "I see William. What can I do to support you in solving this problem?" The first few times we tried that, the staff person who was supposed to read the line couldn't do it – it was just too hard, even though it wasn't even their own words! As you would explain, for you guys in a hierarchical and interdependent culture, responding in the way the scripted line indicated would mean you weren't doing your job of looking after the volunteers-in-training. You became conscious of why this simple line was so hard to say because of our lengthy discussions and training on the values of independence and interdependence and how interdependence's intersection with hierarchical values can cause dependence. With this increased consciousness, intercultural humor began finding its way into our staff training activities. In the scripted skit, after a few seconds of silence without the person able to respond, we would all, including the staff person expected to read the line, break out in huge jolly laughter – not embarrassed laughter. Everyone in the room could look at this situation through intercultural eyes and feel the challenge of adapting cultural behavior. With this humor element helping to make you comfortable, you all went on to being able to actually own these types of words with volunteer problems and of course still assume your Nepali styles of interdependence and hierarchy in your personal lives and in the staff relationships during the project.

Pradip, remember how you and I were at the airport one time and two volunteers, Jake Sommers and Eric Robertson were sitting behind us with their backs to us and so couldn't see us? We overheard Jake say to Eric "yea, I have a challenge with my new supervisor in the district water and sanitation office and it will take some work to develop a relationship with him. He is hugely ascribed-status driven." We looked at each other with satisfaction knowing that perhaps in the past many of the volunteers may have responded with a comment like, "my new supervisor is a jerk, he is so arrogant and full of himself." Through the intercultural training program the volunteers were becoming pretty successful in their intercultural competence development by looking through an intercultural lens and not taking things personally. They were developing fluency in cultural attribution skill - the ability to reserve judgment and de-personalize intercultural interactions by giving cultural explanations for different work and social behaviors between Americans and Nepalis.

Indirect/Direct Communication, Adaptation - Speaking Truth to Power......Beginning Use of Intercultural Competence Performance Models

Remember when we had problems with the volunteers not trusting staff at times because for the volunteers your indirect communication style caused them to view you as inscrutable and they felt that you were not revealing important information. Therefore you were constrained in establishing a high level of trust with them. When I would advise you to be more direct with the volunteers you would respond "but we don't want to break the trust!" I would respond by saying that more directness would build the trust with Americans.

One other memory is the first time you guys and the full staff saw Deepak [my assistant training director] disagree with me openly in our full-staff annual training review so that you guys could see a behavioral model of egalitarian/direct communication behavior. Up to that point, keeping consistency with your hierarchical values, nobody had ever openly disagreed with me in a group setting. I wanted to help you guys become more direct and be able to offer valuable new ideas in the large group setting when we were generating new initiatives for the next project, even within a hierarchical context. Anyway, before the annual review meeting I had asked Deepak, at a certain point, to politely disagree with me so that you could see a model of how to do this. When he did so, it became so quiet and still in the conference center that you could have heard a pin drop. So, I waited a few seconds and said we should take a break. All 40 of you immediately went to Deepak like he was a magnet. You questioned him about how he could have done such a thing. It was then an opportunity for Deepak to act as a cultural guide to you all and explain how I wanted to break down some of the ascribed status dynamics in our meetings and get more direct input from the staff on future initiatives.

A Common Intercultural Language Also Needs New Second Language Abilities

[Much of the challenge in cultural adaptation is caused by one's first language not having effective ways to express behavior based on others' cultural values. For example, American English lacks high levels of honorific language to express deference to those above us in a hierarchy. Nepali language does not lend itself to direct expression of disagreement with higher status group members.]

Then when you all learned some English phrases that would help you to do this like "I have a different perspective" or "that's a good idea and let me add...." it was actually a bit hard to facilitate the meetings because then everybody wanted to talk a lot. It was a good problem to have. The intercultural skill that you developed also helped a lot with your communication with the volunteers. You didn't take it personally anymore when they would express strong disagreement with you or tell you that you were wrong, even though you were the project directors. At the same time you were able to educate and advise them of the indirect communication and deference that they would need to use when communicating to their supervisors and other senior people in their local communities.

You learned a new set of skills – how to adapt your behavior to a new cultural context. Our cultural context was a training program that was based upon behavior change and development of the volunteers' self-reliance rather than a training program that emphasized paternalistically looking after the volunteers and prescribing behavior to them. So now you have skills to fairly easily move back and forth between a work context with egalitarian, direct and independent cultural value drivers, and your own cultural context. I have developed some of this same ability (with always much more on which to work) to move back and forth between hierarchical and egalitarian cultural contexts as a manager and leader thanks in large part to your assistance and advice.

I really appreciate everything I learned from you guys over the years. It has helped me a lot in my work since then.

With Best Regards,
Patrick

LETTER DEBRIEF

Managing the acceleration of systematic intercultural competence development in an organization is of course complicated. The letter reflects a few select elements of this kind of effort:

A. An explicit strategic adaptation plan.
B. Need for both intercultural skill behavior and language performance models.
C. Cultural attribution skill and humor to accelerate development.
D. Need for work environment supports to accelerate skill development.
E. A Word on Intercultural Competency Development

A. Strategic adaptation plan

In order to establish credibility – defined as mutual trust, respect and comfort– I adapted as much as possible to Nepali manager behaviors during my first three months or so there. This adaptation enabled me to get to know my counterparts and their culture. The resultant credibility enabled me to facilitate their cultural behavior change process to better accomplish the workplace objectives. For example, the primary purpose of any training program is ultimately to facilitate participants' self-reliance and ability to learn further in the workplace. This is tremendously difficult to accomplish when the training staff thinks the purpose is to prescribe behavior and utilize a hierarchical role to do so.

B. Behavioral and language performance models are essential.

When I started out working with the staff in Nepal I would give advice like "you need to be more direct with the American volunteers, I would like you to take more initiative in your work, please take greater responsibility in making your own decisions." I might just as well have been speaking Martian to them. This was a foreign language to them because the words I was saying were based on American cultural values like egalitarianism, direct communication, independence, individualism and risk orientation. Imagine you have gone your whole life basically not experiencing instances of individually and independently taking initiative or risks, but instead getting top-down direction from parents, then teachers, and then managers in the workplace. Now, your new American manager is asking you to take these very abstract actions. It is the same situation but in reverse when working with Asian managers of western direct reports in an Asian company – for example, the Asian manager will tell his/her western direct report "you need to be a stronger leader" meaning to be more directive, not more empowering - consistent with hierarchical values. With this lack of any frame of reference for the desired behaviors, participants need to have models of behavior.

In the letter, there were examples of specific behavior models being presented on two levels:
1. Specific style-switching behaviors. For example, within the work process of meeting participation, staff were presented with the specific behavior of disagreeing with a superior when Deepak acted as a cultural model and disagreed with me at the meeting. Another example was the skit with the volunteer expressing a problem with his host family. A very simple phrase –"what can I do to support you in solving this problem?"- reflecting the desired behavior for fostering volunteer independence was presented and acted out.
2. Culture-general intercultural competence behaviors. Eventually, participants engaging in intercultural competence development need to be presented with a comprehensive and systematic model of intercultural competence skill behaviors. In the letter, one of the key skills, Cultural Attribution, was highlighted:

-The ability to reserve judgment and de-personalize intercultural interactions by giving cultural explanations for different work and social behaviors between Americans and Nepalis.

C. Developing Cultural Attribution skill is a pre-requisite to fluent ability to adapt.

My own writing of the letter reflected cultural attribution and the dialogues and activities at Peace Corps/Nepal also reflected it. When staff could finally attribute to cultural reasons their inability to approach volunteer support toward achieving independence, it greatly relieved them. They realized it

wasn't an inherent weakness in them. Cultural attribution is a very powerful skill – it is instrumental in reducing and ultimately eliminating the fear of proactive and open recognition and discussion of cultural differences between intercultural counterparts.

D. Need for work environment supports to accelerate skill development.

As a systematic change management effort, the following work environment interventions supported the training and coaching of staff:
--With my direct reports, stating expectations around cultural behavior change. For example, "Sameer, in the future I will expect you to identify one or two solutions to problems you bring to me. You can provide them as recommendations and then we will decide together what to do. As time goes by, I will expect you to make more decisions on your own. The next time we meet for your performance review, I will help you to develop a goal regarding this."
--Chunking expectations into small pieces.
--Empathizing and validating the challenge in changing cultural behavior.
--Rewarding cultural behavior change in the same way as rewarding any skill change.
--Provide regular feedback and suggestions on cultural behavior change.

A WORD ON INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

Hopefully, this article provides some kind of a vision of how dealing with cultural differences head on can facilitate relatively rapid intercultural competence development and yield close intercultural relationships that in turn yield excellent work results. A key transition point was the relative fluency that we as an organization developed in cultural attribution. This enabled us to proactively and openly communicate about cultural differences which led to greater effectiveness in reconciling the differences.

I think that the PC Volunteer groups that we worked with during that time period benefitted greatly from this training organization's skillful work and then ultimately contributed to the local communities in which they worked.

While more complex in a large global corporation, I write this article as a simple way to convey a kind of vision. It is really addressing the question, "what kind of vision do we have for our clients, the consumers of intercultural competence development products and services?" More specifically, the scope here is "what kind of a people development vision (intercultural and global context) do we have for our clients?" Or, at least this is a slice of a vision.