

“Consulting and Training in an International Environment – Reflections, Best Practises and Lessons Learnt” (Gerhard P. Krejci und Ute Clement)

Category: Experience-based papers

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Abstract

Increasingly consultants are assigned to working with international organisations. Facilitation of workshops and doing trainings with participants from different cultures causes special challenges for consultants and trainers involved. The key question for them is how they can be prepared professionally for such circumstances. As little research is found about the consultants' situation, this paper tries to reflect our practical work in international contexts with groups that consist of members of different cultures. We want to focus on the topics of cultural preparation and how to handle uncertainty and ambiguity in consulting and training processes. We also document some observations with working in a foreign language as well as some requirements for design work. Our findings are summarized in eight propositions, which we want to suggest for further discussions with our colleagues.

Key Words: Consulting, Training, Culture, Intercultural Work.

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The Case for Action

In an economic world, which becomes more and more global, companies face new challenges that need to be considered in daily practise (Bartlett/Ghoshal, 2002). The central point of interest often is found in national or ethnic differences. Nevertheless, when working with culture our emphasis is put on the plural. We believe that it becomes crucial not only to look on the national level (e.g. “Austrians are like...”, “When doing business with Japan...”), but also to balance out culture on various levels (e.g. national, regional, company, professional culture, organization etc.). That does not only have an impact on how an organisation is doing business with its international customers. Increasingly different people located in different places in the world produce commodities and services. It is common to work in international teams located in different places – and this needs to be taken into consideration explicitly (Adler, 2008).

When working in international settings, consultants will be facing some crucial questions: How should consultants prepare themselves for the various cultures? What phenomena (with respect to cultural topics) are observed during consulting and training processes? Which potentials and limits can be seen for consulting and training in an international environment? And how helpful is a systemic-constructivist approach for these challenges?

We are mainly working in the segment of profit-oriented international organisations. Our customers are very often multinational companies with their headquarters located in Austria and Germany. With reference to Lewin’s postulate that “there is nothing more practical than a good theory” (Lewin, 1952, p. 169) we want to explore in this paper the combination of our theoretical background with our practical experiences.

How We See Organisations

Our theoretical framework is based on systemic thinking. Social Systems are based on communication, have their own dynamics based on rules determined within the system (Luhmann, 1987). Systems define themselves by having a clear differentiation toward their environment (e.g. what is inside and what is outside of the system?). They are structurally linked to their environment based

on the system's exchange with its environment and these links have influence on the processes within the system. Systems process highly complex situations, which means that they need to manage unpredictable expectations, communication, actions, cognitions, etc.

Organisations are considered as living social systems and their communication processes are decisions based on specific rules in order to handle complexity (Luhmann, 2000). Organisations are not "trivial machines" (von Foerster, 1993), which only need a special input in order to produce an expected output. Consultants need to "get connected" to the system in a sense that they can play an effective role in the communication processes. We have to be aware that there is no possibility of "instructive interaction" (Maturana, 1978, pp. 242), therefore we believe that consultants can be effective if they try to use proper interventions that are non-instructive (Königswieser/Exner, 2002).

Decisions within an organisation are either formally defined (e.g. strategy, plans, organisational structure, hierarchy, roles and functions, business processes, etc.) or informally processed (e.g. informal communication). Organisations can decide some decisions on purpose ("decidable decisions"). Otherwise, there are also decisions that organisations cannot decide and one example for such "undecidable decisions" is culture (Schein, 1999; Luhmann, 2000).

How We See Culture

We become aware of culture whenever we have contact with others and identify differences. Very often differences are labelled as "culture" (Baecker, 2003). In contact with others, we observe patterns of individual and group behaviour. The observed outcomes of these patterns of a group of people are also called the artefacts or products of a culture. Berger and Luckmann (1996) referred to that as "objective culture".

When people in a group interact with each other we can observe behaviour. They show the various signs of body language like eye contact or physical distances within a group. Or we can perceive how groups solve tasks and cooperate with each other. All these are results of observations that can be

done during the work with others. The way we are engaged in and contribute to these observations is a subjectively influenced process. This is called “Subjective Culture” (Berger/Luckmann, 1996) and depends on the group in which we are. We must be aware that both of those views described, the Objective, as well as the Subjective Culture, are vital and useful sources to understand the phenomena we call “culture” (Bennett, 2009).

Working with Objective Culture

Differences might not seem obvious when viewed from a distance, but play a major role when examined more closely. Europeans, for instance, generally assume that participants from Arabic countries are Muslims. However, in the eyes of Muslims there are significant differences if someone belongs to the Sunni or Shiite community. This is true not only because there are mainly religious differences but rather for practical reasons, as their public holidays may not be the same. This is comparable with the religious differences in Christian countries. A Catholic or Protestant background may lead to significant differences – not only in the way the religion is practiced.

Generally, an important variable is the question of public holidays, and these must be borne in mind when planning workshops. For example, scheduling a workshop with Muslim participants at the end of Ramadan (Islamic fasting period) seems to make little sense. The use of an “intercultural calendar” which, for example, shows the public holidays of all religions may prove to be very useful.

It is definitely an advantage to acquire certain geographical, historical and political knowledge to be able to identify important differences as the following two examples try to exemplify:

At a seminar for an internationally operating company with projects in the Gulf Region, European participants could not distinguish between the different regions of the Middle East. However, this is especially important, as there is a big difference between Turkey (with its emergence from the Ottoman Empire and its own language, namely Turkish), the Arabic Gulf states (with a historically important role in terms of their respective phylogenies, but a common language, namely Arabic) and Iran (Persian history with an Indo-European language).

During a workshop for a Chinese-Taiwanese-German cooperation, it was interesting to observe that the participants from Taiwan adopted an attitude of superiority towards the Chinese. We experienced this as very similar to the relationship between West Germans towards the East Germans after the wall came down in Germany.

It is essential that consultants understand the background of these attitudes. These experiences result in our first proposition:

Proposition 1: In intercultural settings socio-historic variables need to be considered very carefully. These “products” of a cultural group are found in history, religion, political systems, former mergers, etc.

The Limitations of Preparation

In order to prepare for intercultural work consultants will first think of the „other culture“ they will meet during their work. We consider culture as a kind of “observational strategy” (Bennett, 2009). Consequently, what are the specific cultural characteristics consultants will observe and experience? They quickly will develop some hypothesis and decide suitable intervention strategies. In order to see first restrictions for preparation we want to present a situation we had during a workshop for an organisation in the oil-producing industry:

Three participants came from Pakistan, two from Romania, one Australian, one Italian and two Austrians. Three people were from Marketing, two from IT, five from Production. Sometimes the list of participants changed before the workshop and all expectations regarding the group’s composition were on the test.

In most circumstances for us it seems to be impossible to prepare ourselves explicitly for a single culture. We need to address the various “cultural affiliations” by which we are influenced. In most research culture implicitly means the affiliation to a **national culture** (Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner, 2005). In some circumstances, however, there are possibly more important aspects of culture. There might be significant regional differences within one country which have to be taken into consideration. Moreover, each company has its own style and its employees have different professional and family backgrounds. Therefore, depending on

the context and the issues involved, completely different cultural affiliations may be relevant and a distinction must be made between different levels of culture.

In addition to national culture, the **regional culture** may represent a relevant difference. It may play an important role whether a German company is based in Franconia or Berlin.

In one of our consulting processes, the Franconia aspect was the relevant difference for understanding certain behaviour, attitudes and mindsets, despite the international orientation of the company to be advised. Attitudes and mindsets needed to be reflected in the way people interacted and communicated.

Naturally, it is useful to have knowledge of regional differences in different countries; for example, large cultural differences exist in the USA between the East Coast and the West Coast or the Mid West. The same applies to smaller entities, such as Vienna in the eastern and Vorarlberg in the western part of Austria.

Besides geographical affiliations, a further relevant dimension is **corporate culture** which may be so influential that the national culture literally “disappears”. In many multinational companies the common bond of corporate culture is considerably stronger than the national affiliation of employees. Strong identification with the company and its objectives can cross boundaries of origin.

Intracultural differences are often greater than intercultural differences. Within large companies, we identify **sector-based** and **department-based cultures**. Therefore, the culture in an IT department differs significantly from that in an R&D department or in financial accounting.

A software developer, for example, for whom creativity, the playful handling of a computer and flexibility have a high priority, cannot easily understand the formalistic and meticulous way that a controller deals with certain facts.

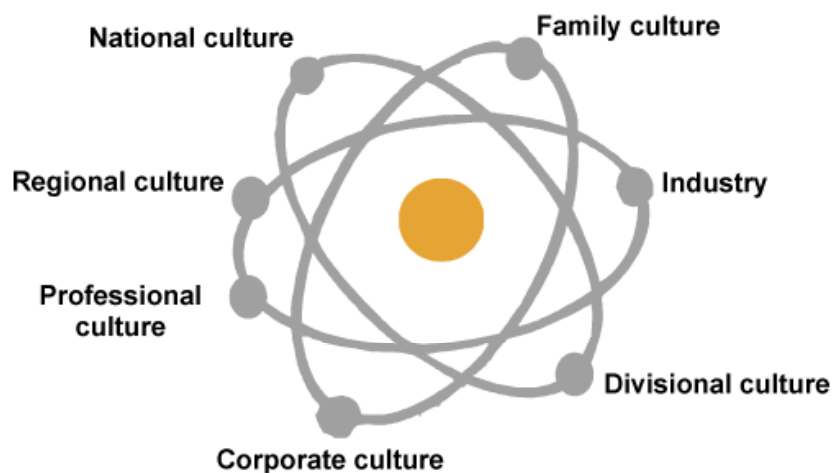
Some project team members from different companies are often closer than team members from different departments within the same company. This brings us to the next important dimension in relation to cultures, namely **professional culture**. People with a specific professional background also

have a specific culture of interaction and mutual recognition. Thus, engineering culture, for example, differs considerably from sales culture.

The first cultural experience people have is mostly within their own **family**. Each family develops its individual values, a completely unique set of behaviour patterns and attitudes. When a child visits a different family for the first time, he or she frequently experiences a first "culture shock". Things which the child would previously have considered the "norm" are handled and experienced differently in the other family. Perhaps school sandwiches are not prepared each morning, like at home, or the meals are not taken together, so the child has to adapt to these new conditions.

The following "model of different cultures" tries to show the importance for deciding the specific cultural focus and to choose the right "zoom".

Model of different cultures



For consultants it is crucial to decide what focus they place on which difference and what they are emphasizing during their interventions. The next example should explain these thoughts:

During an assignment at a European bank based in Northern Italy, our contact person was a Pole, who had worked as an investment banker in Dublin for a long time. The question was: what culture should be referred to? To the national Polish culture, to the fact that he had working experiences in Ireland or that he was now working in Italy? Or to the part of the bank's corporate culture that represented headquarters in Northern Italy? Or perhaps even to the Polish bank where he had started his professional career? Could his professional culture as a former investment

banker or the fact that he was now working in the Human Resources Department be even more important?

We conclude that there is no point in preparing oneself for specific cultures. It is much more important to be sensitive to which cultural differences may arise and become apparent during the work. Therefore, we suggest:

Proposition 2: It is helpful but not sufficient to prepare for single cultures. We need a solid balance between using various levels of culture.

Consultants can achieve this balance by developing their own cultural competences. In the next chapter we will briefly explain these competences and how they can be developed.

Cultural Competences for Consultants

Knowing about cultural differences does not necessarily mean to act competently with others. Learning about “products” of a culture (objective culture) provides with knowledge. Knowledge, however, does not equal competence (Bennett, 2009). Therefore, we need to concentrate on the communication phenomena we are experiencing in intercultural contexts. This is the focus on “Subjective Culture”. Basically, it seems a good starting point for consultants to be aware of their own cultural identity. Our personal identity is a result of contacts and membership to various groups. We can see personal identity as a product of multiple-membership (Buchinger, 2000). In a systemic approach consultants are considered as active part and resources for the process. Therefore, it becomes important that consultants are aware of their cultural identity and develop competences for working with other cultures. Cultural competences are abilities to communicate effectively in situations when one is in contact with other cultures (i.e. to understand and to be understood). As these situations are influenced by different contexts, individuals need to have competences in order to appropriately relate to these various contexts. These competences are a combination of intercultural mindset, skills and sensibility (Bennett/Bennett, 2004, p. 149).

An **intercultural mindset** relates to the establishment of positive attitudes toward cultural differences, the development of a cultural self-awareness and having a clear understanding how cultural generalizations can be used without building stereotypes.

We understand intercultural skill-set as the ability to analyse situations, predict misunderstandings and to adaptively act towards possible misunderstandings (Bennett/Bennett, *ibid*). Examples for intercultural skills are:

- Use of language in different contexts (e.g. greeting, leave-taking, arguing, negotiating, criticizing, etc.)
- Nonverbal behaviour: differences in voice, body language, gesticulations, eye contact, physical contacts, distances during speaking etc.
- Communication style based on the differentiation of low context and high context (Hall, 1977)
- Cognition style, which focuses on the process how things or behaviour are perceived, e.g. how leadership is perceived (Brodbeck, 2006; Steyrer et al, 2007);
- Values: which „refer to the tendency of a group of people to assign goodness to certain ways of being in the world“ (Hofstede, 1980)

Persons with **intercultural sensitivity** are aware of their personal cultural identity, are able to experience cultural differences and know how to competently work with these differences (Bennett, o.J., S. 9).

Subsequently, trainers and consultants are confronted with a multitude of demands. On the one hand they have to manage content and have to control the process, but also have to reflect their own cultural heritage, handle their own stereotypes and permanently coordinate and reflect their attitudes and behaviors (Clement/Clement, 2000). Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 3: Consultants need to develop a good level of cultural sensitivity, which is based on a solid mindset, and a well developed skill-set.

Uncertainty and Ambiguity

As we have already mentioned above, in social systems we have to handle unpredictable situations. The paradigm of non-instructiveness of social systems and the impossibility to plan expected results bring uncertainty also into the consulting process. Uncertainty should be dealt with consciously and in a carefully considered manner. A few examples from our experiences of working abroad may demonstrate this:

In Qatar I found myself (U.C.) in a tent in the desert instead of in a conference or consulting room. Naturally the usual tools, such as flip charts, were not available. So in this case I had to be flexible; the documents were arranged on the wall of the tent and on the ground. In addition, we had to come to terms with the fact that other visitors to the camp, who had no connection with our workshop, would ensconce themselves in the tent and "take part".

At an event in Russia all the tables in a large, prestigious conference room were screwed firmly to the floor. Which is rather an unfavorable basis to work with an "open" seating plan in a circle.

Different locations, different cultures, different customs can be answered adequately with a high level of flexibility.

From the viewpoint of group dynamics sometimes it is not desirable for trainers to take meals together with the participants, in order to avoid mixing up subject matters. Nonetheless, in some countries the refusal to do this would appear to be an affront to the local cultural values and therefore appear offensive. In such a situation it is important to weigh up which dimension will have more impact on the success of the event.

As we can see, consultants have to handle unpredictable situations that are (amongst others) influenced by culture as well and which have significant influence on consulting processes. Thus, we conclude with:

Proposition 4: In order to handle uncertainty and tolerance of ambiguity consultants must react flexibly to the special circumstances. Sometimes they need to adapt their well-established methods and attitudes.

In order to reduce uncertainty social systems try to find ways for "uncertainty absorption" (March/Simon, 1958). One of these mechanisms is trust which will be described in the next chapter.

Handling Trust and Mistrust

At the beginning of a consultancy or a training course in an intercultural setting, special importance should be attached to building confidence, namely by means of detailed orientation, ideas, expectations and also the agreement of ground rules. This is already an excellent opportunity to establish something akin to an individual working culture.

In workshops we are confronted with “temporary systems” which are consisting of participants who have diverse skills, limited history working together, limited prospects of working together in future, and who should solve tasks within a given deadline. The tasks are complex, non-routine and consequential. Groups tend to show “swift trust” in the beginning, however, depending on clear expectations, role clarity and acting according to expectations and roles (Meyerson et al., 1996). We try to address expectations early in the process (e.g. pre-workshop) and clarify our roles explicitly in the beginning.

An Austrian production company acquired a Romanian factory. After a while the Austrian manager asked us to work with the Romanian leadership team in order to improve leadership skills. At the start of the series of workshops we presented ourselves to the participants and immediately clarified our role: “Our task is to work with you on the topic of leadership but not to do an assessment. Everything that happens here is kept confidential. We are going to report the results but not the content of discussions. For us it is important to tell you this right in the beginning”.

We expect to be on a permanent test by our participants and try to “walk the talk” whenever we are working. We consider interventions in terms of strengthening trust, avoiding demotivation and establishing a feeling of belonging together as especially essential. Nevertheless, consultants and trainers have to be able to endure a large amount of mistrust when they use exercises.

Participants meticulously made sure that they carry out their assignments in a way that they are guaranteed to be “successful”. They searched for hidden traps and tricks in every sentence which was said by the trainer. Should an exercise not have the “correct” outcome (which is the point of exercises in some learning situations, namely to learn from one’s mistakes), the facilitator was accused of malice (“You are always using tricks to make us feel bad”). Therefore, it was easy to avoid accepting personal contribution on a mistake and the important follow-up reflection seemed to be more difficult.

When dealing with mistrust it is more crucial how we are perceived by others rather than by ourselves. The following example may demonstrate this:

One of us (U.C.) had been invited to a consulting assignment for the English subsidiary of a German company as a consultant to the German managing director. Despite all her efforts, at the venue itself she was not viewed neutrally as a consultant, but precisely as the “German” consultant. As the industry in question was very conservative, the fact that a woman was advising them came as an added blow. “Why do we need Germans to tell us what to do?” was the question she was faced with after an intervention.

In this case, it was not just the company situation with having conflicts between headquarters and the subsidiary that played an essential role, but also a large amount of injured male pride and a large amount of unassimilated German-British history. At this point it is important to decide what you are dealing with.

Proposition 5: In order to work with uncertainty consultants need to put a strong emphasis on trust building and should be prepared to have a reflective handling of mistrust.

The Language Barrier

Systemic thinking is based on communication and communication processes. We consider culture as a communication phenomenon (Baecker, 2003) and communication requires understanding: it is not only important to contribute, but also to consider the way the contribution is done. We have to be aware that there is non-verbal communication as well, which has sometimes much more impact than the actual words said (Watzlawick et al., 2007). Despite observed differences in multicultural environments language becomes a key to communication. We find it helpful to work in a third language which is distinct from the participants’ mother tongues: a lingua franca. On the one hand we find a deceleration in the process, as everybody has to carefully consider what he or she is saying and understanding. At the same time there is a decent amount of possibilities for misunderstandings and irritations.

Employing an interpreter can be helpful as well. However, we will find a lot of difficulties und insecurities with what has been said by the consultant, what has been translated by the interpreter, and what has been understood by the participants. Nevertheless, a supportive aspect is the need to be more precise in interventions. Participants must have opportunities to clarify and ask questions, thus time becomes vital. We have identified one particular limitation

when translating during workshops, as it is practically impossible to cover and translate everything (e.g. all the subtleties and niceties in the course of discussions). In our experience, it is better to have the process directed by a "native speaker" and rely on one's own ability to identify ambiguities or difficulties – even if they are formulated in a completely different language. Consultants experienced in group dynamics will literally "sense" such situations and then intervene on a selective basis.

In some seminars we worked with local trainers who acted as translators. This worked well as long as the translating function and the joint responsibility amongst the staff were clearly defined. If the role of the translator merges with that of a trainer, this could lead to problems.

The participants reduced a Romanian trainer who had an excellent knowledge of management training to the mere role of a translator. When he tried to explain some of the subject matters in his own words in language the participants did not quite believe him and asked the foreign colleague about his opinion.

"A prophet has no honor in his own country" – we had to concede this alarming finding in the joint staff reflection session. In this case we agreed to assign more responsibility to the local trainer who took over "the lead" for vital parts of the workshop. He no longer translated, but rather instructed the majority of the seminar process independently. However, this requires intensive coordination and the establishment of a trusting relationship within the staff.

Proposition 6: Working in a third language ("Lingua Franca") produces the potential to be more precise and to slow down the process. However, reflective exposure to language barriers becomes paramount and a significant additional amount of time will be necessary in the working process.

Using Similarities and Differences

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, content and context become important under intercultural circumstances. These requirements result into highly complex situations that are prone to insecurity and stress. Individuals and groups tend to reduce complexity by finding simplifications, using stereotypes, or by searching for a "common ground" in the interaction. In mixed-cultural

situations the latter could be an excellent leverage to be used. That is the reason why we believe that similarities provide groups with “comfort zones” which are necessary to achieve high performance in team work.

Nevertheless, the more we try to level out cultural differences and the more we look at similarities, the more groups tend to react with emphasizing differences. Bateson (1984, p. 108) calls this process of progressive differentiation „Schismogenesis“, which can have negative impact on the relationship between groups. This could result in rivalry, hostility, and in the extreme case in breakdown of the whole system. Learning opportunities could fail, workshops might not achieve their goals, and the success of interventions is reduced. Consequently we need to handle differences. As Kovach (cited in Adler, 2008, pp. 140) has found out in a field study with 800 second-year MBAs, the productivity of multicultural teams is highly dependent on the way how diversity is being managed. If differences are ignored, diversity could lead into inferior performance. The other way around diverse teams can achieve high level of performance when their diversity is identified as a positive source for the team’s success. These findings from research in group-processes can be applied for consulting situations as well (Krejci/Clement, 2008). Our reasoning is that we need to emphasize to cultural differences whenever possible in order to achieve excellent results (Clement/Nemeczek, 2000).

A Team consisting of members from Germany, Austria and Switzerland wanted to improve their cooperation. As most of them did not know each other it seemed important to work on the team’s identity. However, a trap would be either to point to the individuals’ identity or to the national differences. Instead we focused on similarities and differences found between the team members and did a series of constellation exercises.

Our argumentation in these last two paragraphs results to a paradox request:

Proposition 7: In intercultural contexts it is vital to address both, similarities as well as differences.

We try to work with this contradiction by using a culturally sensitive design. Some suggestions will be done in the next chapter.

The Role of Design in Intercultural Contexts

Groups collide with different levels of culture in international workshops: the organisational culture of the mother company, the local organisation's culture, the culture of other companies within the corporation, the consultants' intervention style, different nations, different expert roles, etc. In this situation, it becomes vital to establish a working environment that provides a "common ground" for successful communication. We consider a diligent design with respect to culture as an important key factor.

Especially in the beginning of a workshop it seems crucial to make sure that participants get enough "publicity" to show their identity and cultural background. We have, for instance, established a "golden rule" for our work: each participant has to say something at least once:

Software-engineers from 3 different countries needed to establish a regional team, which should design overall solutions for all 3 countries. As an introduction exercise each participant prepared a painting (crayon, water-color, pencil, etc.), which was presented in a „Gallery Walk“. In order to encourage the others to show an exploring attitude, be interested in others, show their stereotypes etc. the participants were invited to explain what they could see and what they believed "the artist wanted to express". Afterwards the "artist" explained his or her intentions, and told the group whether it was right or wrong.

Although such an exercise takes pretty long time it provides the benefit to act on various levels: getting to know each other, reducing uncertainty, establishing trust building, and showing differences and similarities at the same time.

The importance to focus on matters of **time** has already been mentioned. A typical example is, for instance, the different time zones – a fact that internationally operating companies have to manage regularly. Therefore, in terms of coordination, the correct time sequence for work processes must be ensured. For telephone conferences, for example, time must be found that is convenient for all parties involved - scheduling a telephone conference where some of the participants have to be present at 5 o'clock in the morning (in their respective time zone) should be avoided.

In our practical work we can observe different kinds of **anxiety**. Some people do not like to speak out loud in plenary discussions, as they do not feel comfortable to express themselves in a foreign language. Therefore, we try to introduce small group work as often as possible. However, small group work in intercultural contexts has its requirements and we try to tentatively consider the group composition. With respect to the various cultural groups some exercises need high heterogeneity others should be done in more or less homogenous groups. Nonetheless, we need to consider also more time for intercultural group work.

In intercultural contexts many participants prefer to hear and learn more “practical tools” for their daily work than to reflect and discuss their roles and experiences. What comes from the “Golden West” must be state of the art and should be applied directly also in developing countries. Consultants need to be careful not to step into the trap to use theoretical models one by one. Even if some interesting and helpful models are used the question must be asked whether they could be applied in the respective cultural environment.

According to our observation providing **feedback** to group members is preferably done in one-to-one contacts. Overcoming a low level of openness and trust is sometimes nearly impossible. Consequently, process feedback can be difficult as one example illustrates:

During an internal company seminar involving participants from Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary, the participants were asked how the seminar had been gone during a brief process reflection. They answered that everything had been okay. When doing an open feedback round at the end of the event, they were very reluctant. When the trainer asked whether the initially agreed contents had been dealt with in detail and the learning goals had been achieved there was hardly any response. However, when the participants assessed the seminar anonymously, their comments were universally negative. When an attempt was made to find out the reasons for this in a follow-up discussion with a smaller group, it became clear that the participants had already dealt with similar seminar contents in a different context, but did not want to express criticism. One participant afterwards privately suggested not asking again for feedback in public “in this country”.

Trainers can often detect a large amount of reservation and self-control, therefore they need patience when dealing with questions. In some situations it is helpful that feedback is carried out in an anonymous form if possible. Discussions often last longer, which is not always due to the topics, but much more to the necessity of getting used to being personally asked. Often a relapse into typical schoolchild attitudes can be observed. This, for example, also manifests itself in minimal physical positioning in the room, when participants imperceptibly close ranks and distance themselves physically from the consultants.

Summarizing our observations this brings us to our next proposition:

Proposition 8: In intercultural contexts design of social settings, content, time frame, reflection loops, and feedback processes should be done with a strong emphasis on cultural characteristics.

Conclusion and Summary

In this paper we tried to summarize the experiences we have made in our intercultural work with international profit organisations. We want to bring our findings to a final conclusion and suggest them for discussion:

Most intercultural preparation focuses on the obvious artefacts of a culture (history, religion, political systems, etc.), which we consider as very helpful but not sufficient resources (Propositions 1 and 2). Differences need to be seen from different perspectives that need to be balanced (Proposition 2) and consultants need profound personal preparation for intercultural work. They should start with themselves and try to develop their personal intercultural sensitivity (Proposition 3).

As we have seen, uncertainty and tolerance of ambiguity demand a flexible handling by consultants who sometimes need to “let go” their well-established tools (Proposition 4). In intercultural contexts we identified a strong need for trust building and a reflective management of mistrust (Proposition 5).

Most consultants see the language barrier more as an obstacle than as an opportunity. Although there are some issues to be considered when working in foreign languages we believe that there can be identified interesting possibilities using a third language as a “lingua franca” (Proposition 6).

In intercultural work some consultants might emphasize more on similarities than on differences. Nonetheless, our experiences suggest that it would make sense to address both, similarities as well as differences (Proposition 7). One of the core competences of consultants is process design. We propose that designing needs to be done with a strong emphasis on cultural characteristics especially with respect to social settings, content, time frame, reflection loops, and feedback processes (Proposition 8).

Some of the topics identified in this paper might seem to be obvious and might not differ from most consultancy work. Nevertheless, we believe that in intercultural contexts consultants are additionally challenged with cultural phenomena which can have significant impact on their work. Therefore, integrating cultural issues in practical work becomes paramount to success. As only little body of knowledge is available in written form, in this article we tried to contribute to the changes in paradigm of consulting and training. We look forward to experiences of other colleagues and further research in this field.

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