

Incorporating Global Diversity Into Learning

BY ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

Today's business leaders must operate in the midst of profound worldwide social, political, economic and cultural realignment. Operating in this global environment means learning and development executives must understand and appreciate cultural diversity and its impacts on global learning.

Learning executives, especially those working at global corporations, are keenly aware of the challenge they face in helping business leaders thrive in the midst of profound social, political, economic and cultural realignments. Indeed, the problems today's business leaders face increasingly are defined as global problems, and they do not often confine themselves to national borders or fit neatly into cultural disciplines.

Partly because of this interdependence of markets and cultures, the concept of global learning has received more attention during the past decade. Learning executives have realized their programs must prepare their employees and executives to integrate with, and contribute to, the emerging global environment. Operating in a global environment means learning and development executives must have a textured understanding of, and appreciation for, two key considerations: cultural diversity and global learning.

Cultural Diversity Considerations

It's important for learning executives to understand that diversity concepts such as tolerance and sensitivity are uniquely American. When learning executives begin to address cultural diversity in a more global perspective, there is a need to focus on diversity competence that transcends the Americanization of diversity.

Andrés Tapia, chief diversity officer at HR consulting and outsourcing company Hewitt Associates and author of *The Inclusion Paradox*, said business leaders cannot effectively execute a global business strategy without first building cross-cultural competence. Being cross-culturally competent means being able to solve problems, make decisions and resolve conflict in ways that optimize cultural differences for better, longer-lasting and more creative solutions.

"Being cross-culturally competent provides the foundation for being able to manage diversity across

a global enterprise," said Tapia, who has done diversity work around the world, including in Brazil, India, Peru, Poland and Canada.

However, this ability to discern and take into account one's own and others' worldviews requires a commitment to developing leaders via unique approaches.

Personal worldview: When addressing cultural diversity, learning executives have to avoid jumping to initiatives that immediately begin to look at other cultures. The first step should be a deep exploration and understanding of one's own culture and how that worldview is shaped. Tapia said taking their own cultures for granted is a common mistake made by organizations embarking on global diversity and learning initiatives.

"Without a self-awareness of how we are viewed culturally by others, we will not be effective in building bridges of understanding with other cultures, no matter how much we study them," he said.

Exploring other cultures: After learning executives have helped business leaders understand their own cultures and learning biases, they can help them explore other countries and cultures. Here, learning leaders should provide insight into individual national cultures and identify the potential pitfalls of cultural misunderstanding that may occur when interacting with members of that culture.

Cultural Detective, a diversity consulting organization that specializes in training tools that address more than 20 national cultures, often is leveraged by learning leaders to help executives identify and explore a culture using key values as clues to solve specific cross-cultural cases.

Corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell use Cultural Detective to deliver face-to-face training situations and online collaborative learning environments that

address interaction with members of other cultures. An objective of such programs is to help executives become more aware of how people within the culture being studied are motivated by values, beliefs and a “cultural sense” that often is outside the executives’ awareness.

Cross-cultural partners: Another way learning executives can help extend cultural diversity in global learning initiatives is by creating cross-cultural partner programs. State Farm, the insurance corporation based in Bloomington, Ill., has a reverse mentoring program that teams Latino employees with senior executives at the company. The goal of the program is to give leaders a firsthand account of the Latino experience and provide executives with a better understanding of the marketing, branding and personal needs of the Latino community.

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Similarly, learning executives can extend this reverse mentoring concept by pairing up an executive with someone who is culturally different in some significant way. Often participants in such programs commit to a yearlong partnership and are required to complete monthly lessons, as well as dedicated time for reflection with their partners. The most successful cross-cultural learning partner programs also incorporate an application component that assists the participants in identifying ways to apply cross-cultural learning into their work.

Culture assessments: Learning executives can further sanction cultural diversity in their global learning initiatives by leveraging assessment instruments that look at cultural differences. For example, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), developed by Mitchell Hammer and Milton Bennett, is an instrument that measures intercultural sensitivity and provides a framework to explain the ways people are

able to effectively integrate with other cultures.

The IDI measures a person’s sense of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism is people’s tendency to view others from their own cultural perspectives. When executives demonstrate predominantly ethnocentric behavior, they tend to see their own culture as the only culture or, to varying extents, the superior culture.

Ethnorelativism is a person’s developed ability to imagine events or empathize with experiences from another perspective. The underlying concept is that as one’s experiences of cultural differences become more complex, one’s potential competence in intercultural interactions increases. When learning initiatives help business leaders become more ethnocentric, they are helping their leaders view their own cultures as equals among many other cultures.

The IDI is used by learning executives because it is a theory-based test and meets the standards of scientific criteria for a valid and reliable psychometric instrument. When used effectively, learning practitioners can help business executives move away from an ethnocentric stage, such as the denial stage in which a business leader tends to avoid complicating life with cultural differences, doesn’t notice cultural differences around him or her and maintains separation from others who are different.

They can then progress toward more ethnocentric stages, such as the integration stage in which business leaders, to varying extents, have integrated more than one cultural perspective, mindset and behavior into their identities and worldviews. This better allows business executives to move easily among cultures.

An increasing number of learning executives are embracing cultural diversity considerations as they develop global learning strategies. Tapia said the demand from learning executives for Hewitt’s cross-cultural solutions has grown significantly during the past few years and is now one of the fastest-growing practices at Hewitt.

“Clearly, corporations are realizing that they cannot afford to simply look at the cultural diversity issues that lie at the surface,” he said. “They must take into consideration the deeper cultural diversity issues that lie below the waterline.”

Global Learning Considerations

Learning executives have long known that people learn in different ways. However, not all learning styles are equally leveraged in corporate training environments. Most learning programs focus on a style that suits learners who are reflective, linear and analytic — and this tends to favor white males. Recent trends show an increase in learning programs that are more inclusive by focusing on being holistic, personal and practical.

This approach to accommodating different learn-

ing styles takes on a new level of complexity when incorporating learners from different cultures and different parts of the globe. Global learning that requires application across different cultures means learning executives have to avoid judging programs from a Western perspective and re-examine learning that may challenge their fundamental, underlying assumptions of how people learn.

Yet, before learning executives analyze their strategies for embracing cultural diversity, they must understand a few fundamental aspects about culture as it relates to global learning, and be aware of how style and cultural differences impact the learning process. Raymond Arroyo, chief diversity officer at Aetna, advised learning executives to become skilled at multiple aspects when addressing global diversity.

“Understanding workforce diversity without understanding the global marketplace is like entering a triathlon without a bike,” he said. “Workforce diversity, marketplace and global learning are connected, but skills and competencies need to be developed separately for each in order to manage diversity for the best possible results.”

Learning-style interaction: Global learning doesn't just require that learning executives look at multiple cultures within the same learning environment. Global learning also requires that learning executives take into account the effect of interaction between different cultures.

In the United States, learning programs targeting people from certain cultural groups have become familiar. For example, UCLA offers the African American Leadership Institute, Harvard Business School offers a corporate governance program just for Latino executives, and The Center for Creative Leadership offers The Women's Leadership Program.

Now, consider the added complexity of such learning programs if you integrated participants from cultures outside of the United States. For example, the Harvard program on corporate governance would now have to look at how Hispanics raised in the United States might interact and collaborate with Latinos born, raised and educated in Latin America.

Beyond the interaction of the culture represented by a session facilitator and the cultures represented by the audience, global learning also requires preparation for how people from these different cultures will interact with each other. They must be prepared to address learning differences that may display themselves when different cultures interact. This preparation means learning executives must understand the historical legacies that may have resulted in the dynamics and tensions of those different cultures.

Measuring quality: Another implication of cultural diversity and global learning is the issue of quality.

When multiple cultures are represented and interacting, how do learning executives determine the proper way to measure the quality of the program?

Some learning executives may argue that the only way to measure the quality of learning is to determine if the learning outcomes have been achieved. However, when dealing with learning groups from different cultures, learning executives should consider if there are different understandings of quality among the diverse groups represented.

Similarly, learning executives need to determine if different standards of quality need to be applied to accommodate different cultural perspectives of quality. Different educational systems, learning cultures, learner preferences and other national or regional characteristics could have a significant impact on quality management and quality assurance.

Assessment techniques: Closely related to quality measurement are considerations about which assessment techniques will be used to determine the amount of learning that has occurred. Learning executives must decide if they should assess learning based on achievement on a standardized test that may favor one culture over another, or if they should apply assessment techniques that can be tailored to meet the needs of learners from different cultures.

If learning executives are not careful about how they assess learning by people of different cultures, they run the risk of creating learning initiatives in which some may struggle to adapt to an uncomfortable way of learning, leading to underachievement on assessments.

Design bias: Learning executives also need to avoid inadvertently incorporating bias or narrowly focused cultural perspectives into initiatives. Global learning executives must remember to balance the tendency to control the learning situation with a desire to promote cultural autonomy.

People from other cultures learn in different ways, and that should be a key consideration when designing learning programs. Learning executives should be involved in continual re-examination of their assumptions, expectations and biases.

When we look at cultural diversity and global learning, we broach a sensitive area. Incorporating cultural diversity in global learning consists of a series of interconnected, integrated activities and philosophies. Because many corporations offer a diversity of global learning initiatives, it is imperative they do so with intention in order to avoid a fragmented approach. **CLO**

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