

Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in Leadership Development: A Critical Analysis

Abstract

In the 21st Century where individuals from an assortment of cultural backgrounds share the same workplace, it is crucial for all employees in general and the top management of an Organization in particular to possess the required cross-cultural skills to engage themselves in professional relationships with colleagues belonging to a variety of socio-cultural milieu. The present Paper is the outcome of an empirical research conducted by the author on a sample size of 60 respondents to quantify their cross-cultural skills at workplace. To be precise, the paper tries to analyze in brief the importance and relevance of Cross-Cultural skills in the backdrop of the empirical study as well as the review of literature conducted by the author on more than 20 research papers authored by eminent HRD Professionals and researchers for leaders in Corporate Houses in managing their workplace obligations.

Key Words: Cross-Cultural Training, Cross-Cultural Coach

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Introduction

What Is Cross-cultural Competency?

In a heterogeneous work environment in which the employee-base of any major multinational Organization belongs to varied cultural, religious, linguistic and racial backgrounds, it becomes imperative on part of the employees to exhibit not only tolerance for diversity but also mutual respect for each other's adhered way of life. Cross-cultural competence refers to the capability possessed by an individual to engage himself/ herself both professionally as well as personally with people of different cultural backgrounds which not only helps oneself to meet his/her own needs along with the attainment of the Organizational goals.

Cross-Cultural skills in Leadership

As only a few successful Business Organizations in the 21st Century work with people belonging to a single cultural background and instead engage people from a range of socio-cultural milieus, it has become obligatory on part of Corporate Leaders of the modern age to adapt to multi-culture friendly ways of managing people.

For inducing the required amount of proficiencies within the leaders with respect to appreciating the essence of each culture within a quick timeframe, it is essential to impart Cross-Cultural leadership competency training modules to all categories of employees within an



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Organization. This will help leaders to align employees irrespective of their cultural affiliations towards the broader Organizational culture.

Though efforts should be made in making people understand and respect each other's culture but, at the same time, care should also be taken to ensure that no attempts (deliberately or accidentally) are made to modify or alter the cultural ethos of any socio-cultural entity as the same might have severe repercussions which might range from cultural incompatibility at workplace to allegations might be scrapped by certain cultural units of biasness being exhibited by the Organization against them.

It is essential to note here that there are two levels in which culture operates. At the first level, the individuals are molded by the socio-cultural tenants which they are born with such as their ethnicity, race, religion, culture, language etc. and the second level, they are influenced by the ideology, work environment, cultural , moral values etc. of the Organization of team in which they work. While the second level of culture should be aimed at being made more assorted in character to endure and accept employees belonging to differing cultural set ups, the first level of culture should not be attempted at being modified as any attempt in this respect can constitute the crime of cultural deterioration.

Objectives and Methodology

With an ever-growing number of expatriates being deployed by multi-national Companies (MNCs) to work in third-world Countries like India, possessing sound knowledge on the cultural sensitivities of employees belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds has become an impediment. Hence, it was considered essential by the author to conduct an empirical study to analyze the degree of cross-cultural competencies possessed by Indian employees at workplace. The Study was undertaken by the author with the primary purpose of attaining the following objectives: -

1. To understand the relevance of cross-cultural skills in the 21st Century workplace
2. To examine the impact of cross-cultural skills on leadership
3. To analyze the overall perception of employees working in Indian Companies regarding the relevance of Cross-Cultural Training Programmes being implemented by various Corporate Houses.
4. To examine the importance of cross-cultural Coaches in imparting the required cross-cultural skills to employees at workplace

For the purpose of collecting relevant facts, figures and information, a number of primary and secondary techniques for data collection was employed by the author; some of which are as follows: -

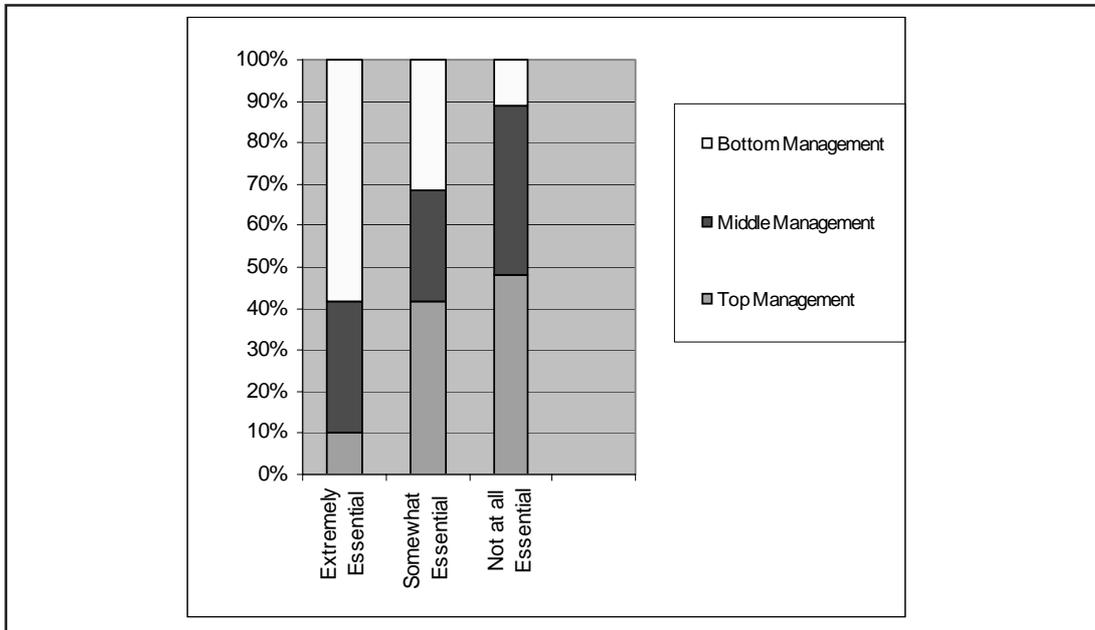
1. Survey Questionnaire Technique
2. Case Study Technique
3. Interview Technique
4. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Technique

Key findings

The research came up with 6 key findings. Given below is a brief account of each of the six key findings followed by the graphical representation (in some cases) of the responses received to the statements mentioned in the Questionnaire used by the author for the purpose of drawing responses for the sample respondents with regards to certain parameters of CCT: -

1. Cross-Cultural Training (CCT) is essential in the overall development of an individual which underpins the social cohesion and social capital of a society apart from contributing significantly towards the overall Organizational cultural competence.

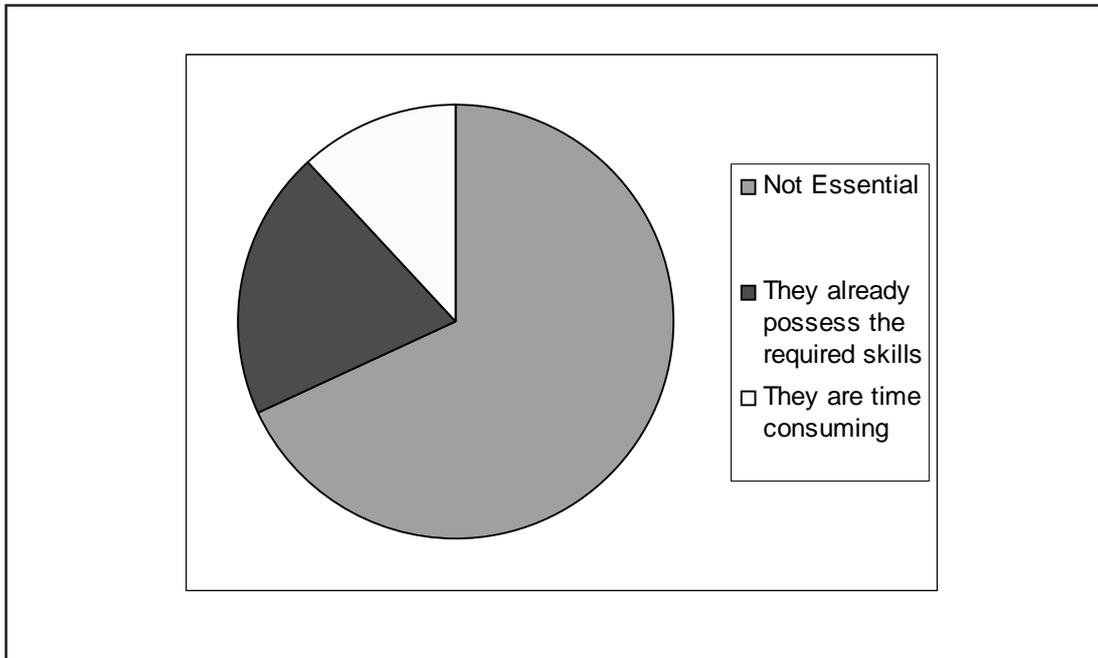
Figure 1: Opinion regarding the importance of Cross Cultural Training by various categories of employees in an Organization such as Bottom Management, Middle Management and Top Management (in percentage terms)



Source: Research Outcome

1. Pre-training and post-training surveys through Questionnaire, Individual Interview, Case Study and Focus Group Discussion Techniques statistically reflect significant improvements in the overall awareness of employees with regards to socio-cultural influence on fellow colleagues as well as on customers.
2. The frequency of CCT and the depth of their content are extremely meager as a consequence of which the pre-set objectives for most CCT Programmes are not satisfactorily attained.
3. The top management in most organizations under study is unwilling to undergo any type of training in general and CCT in particular. During the course of interaction with respondents belonging to the top management of Corporate Houses, they revealed a few reasons for their reluctance to participate in CCT such as; firstly; some feel CCT are not essential for the modern day Organizational context where children grow up in a multi-cultural atmosphere and learn to cope with diversities through their peers, neighbors, family members, friends, kiths and kins, hence there is no need for formal cross-cultural training; secondly; some feel that the amount of cross-cultural skills required in a workplace are possessed by them which they have accumulated over their long period of service and thirdly; some also feel that CCT programmes are time-consuming in nature which reflect no noteworthy impact on the overall Organizational performance.

Figure 2: Reasons mentioned by respondents belonging to the top management for their reluctance to participate in Cross-Cultural Training Programmes



Source: Research Outcome

1. Not even a single organization under study was identified to possess a full-time/ permanent CCT team. As the components of a typical CCT Programme is multi-disciplinary in nature and requires subject-matter specialists from different Disciplines to provide their input both during the formulation of the course modules as well as while imparting them during training sessions, it is recommended that a CCT team should comprise of a Psychiatrist, an Anthropologist and a Human Resource Development (HRD) Professional.
2. The duration of the CCT programmes being imparted to employees should be drastically scaled down in order to simultaneously enhance employee participation and improve the attainment rate of the training Programme.

Cross-Cultural Coaches

In a competitive environment where securing a business margin over one's competitors is extremely tough, it becomes exceedingly difficult on part of Organization Leaders to learn the fundamentals of cultural respectability which is necessary for operating in today's workplace which is not only diverse but also highly conscious about its rights and privileges.

Exhibit 1: Sample Action-Guide for implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programmes

Action-Guide for Implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programmes

Step 1 Define the Organizational Context and Training Objectives

Step 2 Understand Cultural Competence and Cross-Cultural Training

Step 3 Promote the Value of Cross-Cultural Training to the Organization

Step 4 Design and Conduct Cross-Cultural Training Effectively

Step 5 Evaluate and Follow-up the Cross-Cultural Training Programme

Source: "The effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training in the Australian Context" authored by Robert Bean and Published by Cultural Diversity Services Private Limited.

Hence, it is essential for organizations to be equipped with Cross-Cultural Coaches who are endowed with vast varieties of Behaviorally-based global tools that are adequate to address not only the cross-cultural needs but also the formal, cognitive as well as emotional needs of the workplace. These Coaches impart specifically designed training modules to train the employees on specific personal skills affecting their cultural visualization of divergent societal groups. The most important quality of Cross-Cultural Coaches is that, they are acutely aware of the requirements to align cultural environment with overall organizational productivity.

The following are the benefits that an organization might accrue by hiring a Cross-Cultural Coach: -

1. The skills required to develop and cultivate complicated Cross-Cultural relationships in global organizational set ups.
2. Identifying ways and means to motivate people of divergent cultural backgrounds and ideological inclinations.
3. Training leaders to design effective pro-culturally effective systems to overcome customs-related workplace barriers.
4. To downscale opposition to a particular culture or group of people and establish an environment where people work together for the attainment of a common goal.

Conclusion

However, the current trends of disproportionately lower quantum of importance being attached by organizations towards Cross-Cultural issues such as Training modules being imparted to its employee base, conducting Cross-Cultural sensitization camps for the employees of the organization is a perilous phenomenon which might lead to a surge in workplace conflicts in the future resulting out of an ever increasingly diverse employee base. Hence, before it is too late, adequate amount of attention should be provided to Cross-Cultural issues so that cultural incompatibilities arising out of the existence of divergent cultural groups within the same roof can be countered.

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