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Promoting Intercultural Competency in the Nuclear Workplace

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Abstract

Intercultural preparedness training is a staple of many workplaces that require international competence, including government, business, and non-profits. Even highly experienced diplomats are often advised to attend training sessions on this topic. Intercultural preparedness training promises to be especially relevant and useful for professionals working in the field of nuclear nonproliferation, including in the application of international nuclear safeguards. This paper outlines the fundamental philosophies underlying a training program that will benefit professionals in the nuclear arena, whether practitioners of nonproliferation or other sub-fields relying on international cooperation and collaboration, and how such a training program might be implemented efficiently.

Introduction

Intercultural preparedness consists, among other things, of being aware that various cultures can have widely varying perspectives. These perspectives influence the way that a person develops relationships, responds to situations, and operates in a professional setting. Developing intercultural competency in a systematized fashion can improve the success of international and cross-cultural missions, and should be a staple of training provided to employees who work interculturally.

The implementation of international nuclear safeguards involves the cooperation of individuals from different nations, backgrounds and areas of expertise. Broadly, managing projects and teams in intercultural settings poses unique challenges. Maximizing the success (both the effectiveness and the efficiency) of a project with such diverse teams is dependent upon good communication, leadership, and team skills, and achieving these is greatly facilitated by the ability to work across cultures. This is true even in highly technical organizations. In the field of nuclear nonproliferation, understanding intercultural factors in behavior can have a direct impact on the effectiveness of outcomes directly related to national and international safeguards and security.

What is the value of intercultural preparedness in our field?

Intercultural preparation is valuable and necessary for staff traveling abroad or hosting foreign counterparts at home to perform international nuclear safeguards and nuclear security-related work. There is currently a dearth of widespread, systematized training available in many large international organizations, as many training budgets focus on the technical missions at hand. While many practitioners of nuclear safeguards implementation, material protection, control and accounting

(MPC&A), and other nonproliferation concerns have extensive experience traveling and working abroad, and may speak multiple foreign languages, few have had systematized intercultural training - training that could greatly enrich both their professional success on foreign missions, and their personal understanding of the attitudes of the foreign workforces they find themselves interacting with. A significant body of research exists attesting to the importance of intercultural preparedness, stemming from many fields.

Many organizations that operate internationally within the field of nuclear energy, nuclear safeguards, nuclear nonproliferation, or related topics could usefully develop a time-efficient, targeted training program to provide its employees and contractors with the tools they need to improve their understanding of the perspectives by which their various national counterparts may be informed. This paper outlines the justification for, and some of the basic tenets of, a proposal for the development of such a program. The proposal will outline the basics of intercultural scholarship that provide the bedrock of an intercultural approach, and will then describe a two-step system in which employees will be provided with targeted trainings: the first will be a 'general concepts' of intercultural communication seminar. Then, based on the regions in which the employees may be working, the intercultural training system will provide culture-specific training on an as-needed basis by country.

Overview of Proposed Training Program

Any effective training program on intercultural issues must by necessity begin with a discussion of what 'culture' really is. Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior.¹ Anthropologist Edward Hall defined culture as communication in his seminal 1958 book, *The Silent Language*. Hall contended that humans communicate without using words, and that this 'silent language' is learned unconsciously as we grow up in our specific cultural settings.² Many sources of misunderstanding and conflict between people can often be attributed to varying meanings, based on culture, that are assigned to nonverbal messages.³

Some of the important facets of culture that are affected by this silent language, and the differences that invariably attend perspectives toward relationships, include attitudes toward time, space, hierarchy, language, and a belief in the 'correctness' of one's own cultural outlook. One of the fundamental lessons of this short paper, and of anthropologists and interculturalists writ large, is that while it may be difficult to envision how any cultural attitude or perspective other than one's own can be

¹ Spradley, James. "Culture and Ethnography", *Participant Observation*. Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1980.

² Hall, Edward T. *The Silent Language*.

³ Weaver, Gary. *Intercultural Relations: Communication, Identity, and Conflict*. Pearson, 2013: page 1.

legitimate, developing such empathy and understanding is key to successfully accomplishing tasks and developing relationships in a cross-cultural or intercultural setting. In the field of nuclear safeguards, where the outcomes of inspections and international collaboration and communication are of immense import for international security, this is especially cogent. Edward Hall stated that for many Westerners: “Western man sees his system of logic as synonymous with the truth. For him it is the only road to reality.”⁴ While this may be qualified as a generalization, the tendency to equate a ‘logical’ western-mentality approach to things with the ‘correct’ approach to things is not only dangerous, but a recipe for potential misunderstandings professionally and personally. While the IAEA is an international, not a Western, organization, it is safe to say that many of its cultures are western and innately view themselves as doing things the ‘correct’ way, and therefore providing such baseline training becomes all the more urgent for effective communication in such a multi-cultural setting.

Many specialists in intercultural relations use the iceberg analogy for understanding culture. This analogy effectively illustrates how the behavior of an individual, on the surface, could lead to certain conclusions about her/his underlying beliefs. Moreover, those underlying beliefs are precisely that: they lie beneath the surface, and cannot be understood merely by observing the behavior alone.

Overarching goals of proposed training

The basic goals for any intercultural training, but particularly for one geared toward the needs of an organization tasked with international collaboration, are:

- Achieve a common understanding of “culture”
- Introduce some key concepts from anthropology and intercultural communication
- Recognize that our cultural differences influence how we communicate with each other
- Identify how we can more effectively communicate across cultures despite the differences that seem to divide us.
- Provide staff culture-specific training in anticipation of engaging abroad or with Member State counterparts hosted by, or working at, the IAEA or other relevant organizations.

There is a danger in providing staff with mere ‘cookbooks’ on culture, for example, providing a simple list of dos and don’ts for a certain country without appropriate general cultural preparedness training. This may be insufficient preparation. The danger, specifically, is that all intercultural training, including the cookbook approach, is based on generalizations (as opposed to stereotypes). If the staff member finds him or herself in a situation in which the generalizations do not apply, the cookbook will not be useful. However, step one of this proposal is to

⁴ Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. Page 9

provide the staff member with overarching intercultural empathy preparedness that will serve that person well, including in the case of an unexpected response or encounter - which, as anyone who has traveled knows, is extremely common.

General Cultural Preparedness Training - Part 1

The approach, therefore, should focus on two very different levels. The first level of training should address overarching cultural empathy issues, which often include, but are not limited to, the following topics. Providing staff with the opportunity to understand that a broad spectrum of intercultural pitfalls, and opportunities, exist, is an important step on the path to becoming interculturally competent and prepared.

Types of culture: this topic can include issues of ethnicity and nationality, gender, geographical location, and organizational setting, among others.

Individualism versus collectivism: this is the degree to which people rely upon and have allegiance to the self. In a highly individualistic culture, an employee is more likely to be emotionally independent from a company or job. In an individualistic culture, freedom and challenge are considered of high import, and it is socially acceptable for people to pursue their own individual initiatives. In a collectivist culture, the primary identification is with the group, as opposed to in the individualist culture. Collectivist cultures value group harmony and interdependence, and the emphasis of social interaction and social life is on mutual obligations and group achievements, as opposed to individual rights and achievements.

Uncertainty avoidance: This factor also varies by culture. Higher willingness to take risk in many cases corresponds to individualist cultures. Understanding the cultural continuum for uncertainty avoidance will assist engagements and missions by making staff more empathetic and less surprised by differing attitudes toward risk and uncertainty that they may encounter.

Long-term orientation: This is the degree to which people focus on future rewards and delayed gratification. While all of these factors are generalizations, cultures with long-term orientation favor long-range planning, while cultures with low-long term orientation are more inclined to search for ways to get quick results.

There is a large set of factors that need to be understood, at least in principle, to assist staff in cultural preparedness. Some others that are highly important are notions of masculinity, the value placed on relationships, cultural attitudes towards time (monochronic versus polychronic), power distance, focus on egalitarianism versus hierarchical systems, cultural perspectives on work ethic, proxemics (spatial negotiation and norms), and varying methods of communication, among others. All of these topics, and others, should be at least touched upon in the first part of the training.

Culture-specific Training - Part 2

In addition to a broad module on intercultural preparedness, training addressing cultural issues need to also provide staff with a set of generalizations that they may refer to when traveling or working abroad – with the understanding that generalizations do not always apply, and must be assessed on an individual basis. Culture-specific training sessions will provide more targeted information to an employee on a given culture with which they are dealing. It is important to know certain basics of a country's culture before an employee arrives. That said, having the baseline of the general patterns of culture would make the culture specific information more effective.

For the purposes of this paper, let us use the United States as an example, where a country-specific outline of some generalizations could be useful (both to the US national, as well as to the foreign counterpart.) These generalizations certainly do not encompass the vast range of backgrounds, specific cultures, geographical locations, or personal opinions of all Americans, but they can be useful both for non-Americans doing business with Americans, and for Americans to better understand their own general tendencies.

Some of the items on a preparation list for non-Americans traveling to the USA or working with Americans would include the following. American culture can be individualistic and low-context. There is a strong belief in attaining one's own destiny, and little is left to fate. American society is energetic and goal-oriented, with a focus on short-term results. Change is seen as positive and good. Americans favor progress, improvement, and growth. Americans are very focused on time and being on time, and consider time a valuable resource that should not be wasted. Meeting times are of great import, and lateness is looked down upon and avoided. One of the results of this can be a society that focuses on efficiency to the deficit of interpersonal relationships. American culture is generally a 'to do' culture, as opposed to a 'to be' culture, meaning that American culture is often very preoccupied with productivity, as opposed to quality of life. The focus on efficiency, seizing one's own destiny, and being active contribute to this. Americans are highly competitive and often value competition over cooperation. Americans can be highly informal. Formality is considered by some to indicate arrogance. Americans tend to require a large amount of personal space, and are extremely aware of issues of physical hygiene.

The Case for Culture – How does it impact technical nuclear work?

There are numerous case studies that point to the influential role that culture has played in various situations at the nexus of policy and technology. In respecting the brevity of INMM papers, let us focus the spotlight on the most recent, and one of the most memorable, instances of cultural attributes causing a technical failure in the nuclear field – the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant disaster of 2011. Following an investigation into the causes of the disaster, the Japanese parliament released a report noting that some of the 'fundamental causes' of the disaster were found in Japanese culture: it's "reflexive

obedience, [its] reluctance to question authority, and [its] devotion to ‘sticking with the program’”.⁵ While there were other causes that led to the disaster’s outcome, taking note of the cultural component is an important indicator of the need to recognize the cultural factor in even highly technical nuclear operations.

The disaster referred to in the Japanese Parliamentary report as “man-made” and “made in Japan” is illustrative not only in regards to Japanese culture, but to the culture of any country with highly complex technical processes that can have a large impact on both security and the environment. It provides great proof that cultural preparedness (both inward-looking, and outward-looking) can play a key role in both nuclear safety, and, potentially, security.

Conclusion

The provision of intercultural training can be accomplished with minimal impact on the busy schedules of technical and policy personnel. Efforts to better prepare staff for intercultural scenarios that may arise during a duty trip or hosting situation can be undertaken with minimal impact to budgets, and with the potential to greatly improve negotiations, security, and safety issues. Training should take place on two levels, so that staff are not under the faulty impression that a ‘cookbook’ for cultural preparedness for a given country is all that is required to understand the complex interplay of issues that may be at work during international collaborations.

⁵ The National Diet of Japan. *The Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission*

