



P A R A D I G M  L E A R N I N G
T H E P O W E R O F D I S C O V E R Y

Communicating Across Cultures

Businesses are expanding globally, but their important internal messages don't always reach every employee.

It's time to change that.

Are you willing to stake your life on the effectiveness of your company's training methods?

Only a fool would take such a gamble, but business history books are filled with companies that have made foolish mistakes. Sometimes, it's the simple failure to communicate with a multinational workforce. And in at least one case, well ... the results were rather *grave*.

We'll spare you all the details, but we will share this: One of the world's most experienced engineering and project management firms was forced to retreat from a venture in the South Pacific a few years ago because it never got the local workforce to understand what they were expected to do — build an entire mining town, complete with housing, power plants, air strips, roads and hospitals — within three years.

In the native culture, however, there were no such concepts as private property, money, central government or work regulations — concepts at the bedrock of Western capitalism. The leadership team never truly connected with locals, who didn't believe, for example, in something as basic as a work shift.

Eventually, the natives took up bows and arrows. (And we'll stop the story there.)

In communication, there's one time-tested rule: Know your audience. But with the rise of international companies spanning countries and continents, one major challenge has gone hand in hand with rapid globalization: the frustration companies face when they try to communicate effectively with employees from different cultures.

Behaviors, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs can have a significant impact on successfully working toward a common goal.

Is this really a big consideration? You bet your life it is.

Paradigm Learning is an international corporate training and communications organization specializing in the design of business games, simulations and Discovery Maps®.

Paradigm Learning creates highly acclaimed educational programs in the areas of talent leadership, business acumen, project management, team building, leadership and talent development.



Translation Pitfalls

Fortunately, many of these “meta-national” companies have realized the power of employee training and communication as they experience the constant flow of change. They recognize the challenge of integrating new people from across the globe into a unified team, and the importance of imparting a common understanding of their business model, objectives and corporate culture. They understand that employees want — and need — to know where their new fast-growing company is headed and where they fit in.

That’s the good news. But the methodology and materials need to be adaptable to multiple languages, dialects, cultures and customs. And it’s not as simple as merely translating a training program from English into another language. That’s the bad news.

Did you know it takes as much as 30 percent more text to translate an English document into the major languages of Europe? For example, consider the organization known around the world as FIFA. In French, the group’s official language, it’s *Le Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (six words). In English, it’s simply the *International Soccer Federation* (four words).

Imagine how much complexity would be involved — and how much more it would cost — to increase the size of training materials by an additional third.

There are about 6,700 living languages in the world. Even if you concentrate on the 15 most common — which account for almost 50 percent of the world’s population — it’s still a massive undertaking.

Here’s another challenge: Idiomatic expressions prevalent in English — puns, jokes, acronyms — seldom translate at all. This is true even

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Roger E. Axtell is an expert on global business relations. In his book, *Do’s and Taboos Around the World* (1993, Wiley), he shares some verbal mistakes that can lead to cultural misunderstanding:

- **Jargon:** Often clouds what you should say plainly.
- **Officialese:** Governmental jargon — the worst form.
- **Slang:** Regional expressions and euphemisms.
- **Humor:** Funny is in the eye of the beholder.
- **Vocabulary:** Don’t send your audiences running for a dictionary.
- **Grammar:** Poor use frequently is distracting.
- **Local color:** Can a Samoan really relate to a traffic jam?

between English-speaking cultures. During a recent meeting between a U.S. company and a British company to discuss a joint venture, negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the Americans proposed tabling discussion of a key point. In the United States, “tabling a motion” means not discussing it. In the United Kingdom, the same phrase means the exact opposite—bringing it to the table to discuss.

Clearly, this much is obvious: Simple translation doesn’t always work.

Universal Concepts

If a translation approach is so fraught with peril, why rely on it? Good question. Indeed, according to some psychological research, only about 10 percent of interpersonal communication is language-based. Instead, what we learn and remember is really a function of what we see, what we hear and what we experience.

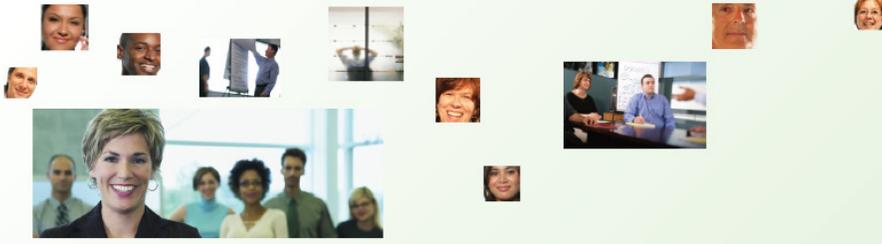
What We See. From ancient cave drawings to the Sistine Chapel’s frescos, the world’s cultures have always conveyed information through visual representation. Today, the old adage about a picture being worth a thousand words has never been truer. Newspaper circulations are plummeting, but television ratings are going up. Why? Pictures. While the average length of a sound bite on network news is only 7.3 seconds, stories seldom get air time unless there are pictures to accompany them. Because people love pictures.

Illustrations can put forth a message, thought or explanation more succinctly, more clearly and with less margin of error than text. Think of the “no smoking” symbol, or disabled-parking signs. These are perfect examples of the power of pictures as well as the clarity that universal icons such as tools, math symbols and musical notations can bring to training presentations. They add a dimension beyond text and increase comprehension and retention of the main messages. Such widely recognized symbols do not need to be translated.

But not every visual works without context. The red, white, blue Uncle Sam has no particular relevance outside of North America. In the United States, the color red means danger, but in China it means luck. That’s why it’s important to remember ...

What We Hear. Storytelling is a universal form of communication, from the ancient Greek fireside fables of Aesop to Garrison Keillor’s radio monologues about modern life in Lake Wobegon. Overwhelmingly, people love to tell and listen to stories, regardless of age, as a way of entering others’ life experiences.

Like visuals, stories paint vivid and memorable mental pictures. They can describe situations, make points and teach lessons — the moral



of the story — that are absorbed almost automatically, especially if you are able to employ universally understood truths that can personalize and explain your corporation, product or mission.

Stories provide dates, times, places and names, but they simultaneously produce reaction and emotion — including feelings of attachment, sympathy and agreement — by interweaving reason and mystery that draws listeners into the characters' lives. With imagination unleashed, listeners may vicariously explore the storyteller's experiences — and his intentions.

What We Experience. Listeners filter the messages they receive through their own personal lives. It's the way the human brain creates order from sensory input. Children of the 1960s, for example, have a far different reaction to tie-dyed T-shirts and folk music than do the children of the 1980s. It's the difference between living through the Vietnam era vs. merely reading about it. It's why college students who serve internships and skilled laborers who serve apprenticeships are considered more employable than those who don't — they've already experienced what otherwise would be expressed in theoretical terms.

Experience is the guiding principle behind an educational concept called "discovery learning," which holds that people learn and retain information better when they actively participate in the learning process. If they've actually undergone an event being described or depicted, they can directly relate to the information being presented.

Sometimes, however, listeners do not have that requisite experience to fully appreciate and process information. Fortunately, role-playing situations and controlled simulations often can replicate a lifetime of experience.

In many cultures, games are fundamental tools for education. This is particularly the case in China, where games and simulations are being incorporated into employee training as the country rapidly moves toward a global market-oriented economy. "Nontraditional learning methods such as games and simulations are highly sought by Chinese companies," says Richard Lai, chairman of Intellexis China, a consulting firm working with many of those companies. "They seem to be intrigued by how quickly their employees gain some hands-on experience."

What's In it for You?

As companies expand internationally, leaders face the unique challenge of interacting with people who are culturally, educationally and often fundamentally different than they are. Indeed, a preponderance of research indicates that more than half of the world's population can be considered either illiterate or semiliterate.

So if your company is crossing borders and entering new territory, it's probably time to ask yourself one big question: How will you communicate with and train these people who will be your employees? Memos? Workbooks? PowerPoint?

For companies with offices from Arizona to Azerbaijan, from Maine to Madagascar, the right move is to look for training tools that combine universal concepts of communication.

Beginning with the assumption that your training program will be created in English and then adapted for international audiences, here's a checklist of some things you should consider during its development:

Language. Writing should be brief, active, declarative and emphasize clarity over cleverness. The fewer the words that must be translated, the fewer potential mistakes.

During the conversion process, be certain your translators have a native grasp of the language and cultural idiosyncrasies. For example, even though Spanish is the primary language of Mexico, Cuba and Spain, there are considerable differences in the words and phrases used in each country. Certain words that seem innocuous in Madrid might have embarrassing connotations in Cancun.

Imagery. Are the pictures and illustrations used in your training program sensitive to international audiences?

In Arabic society, for example, many people do not use their left hands to interact with others — it's considered unclean and impolite. Does your program's artwork take that into consideration? Or will you have to commission more artwork — and incur additional expenses — if you launch your training program in Dubai?

SCHEMATA-RAMA

Psychologists say some archetypical images have the same meaning across cultures and generations. Some of them:

- Sunrise and sunset
- Shadows / fear
- Hot and cold
- Mother / nurturing
- Father / authority
- Heroes
- Tricksters / mischief makers

ON THE OTHER HAND

Think gestures are universal? Think again. Here's a look at how the uniquely American "OK" symbol is perceived in other countries.

- **Japan:** Money, sometimes seen as a request for a bribe.
- **France:** Worth nothing, zero value.
- **Russia:** A certain part of, um, the anatomy.

Whatever you do, don't offer a thumb's-up in Eastern Europe, or a "V" for victory in the UK or Australia. You might get slapped.



Storytelling. Audiences want a good story, wherever you go. When you want to see a movie, your first question is always, “What’s the movie about?” Does the story capture your attention? Can you relate to the characters?

Likewise, in a training program, it’s easy to remember important information presented within the framework of a story, complete with plot exposition and character development.

Think of the movie *Casablanca*. What do you remember? The beautiful love story filled with rich detail? Or just a laundry list of facts – man runs bar, meets girl, is threatened by bad guys, condones gambling and wears white suits?

Interaction. How will your training program engage your audience? Will you seek active participation in the learning process, or do you want passivity? Under the principles of discovery learning, activity equals memory.

Games and simulations are especially effective for stimulating conversations that significantly increase acceptance, understanding and retention of concepts beyond what’s possible with traditional lecture-based formats. By immersing participants into a program, letting them assimilate the information with their own frames of reference, it builds a comfort level that leads to confidence and commitment.

And for businesses that want to be successful on a global scale, that’s the surest bet of a lifetime. ■

WHAT IS DISCOVERY LEARNING?

Discovery learning is a powerful instructional approach that guides and motivates learners to explore information and concepts in order to construct new ideas, identify new relationships, and create new models of thinking and behavior.

Discovery learning educational sessions are highly experiential and interactive. They use stories, games, simulations, visual maps and other techniques to get attention, build interest and lead learners on a journey of discovery toward new thinking, actions and behaviors.

The approach incorporates three key ideas:

- **Problem Solving:** The design must guide and motivate learners to participate in problem solving as they pull together information and generalize knowledge.
- **Learner Management:** Learning must be learner-driven so that participants, working alone or in small teams, can learn in their own ways and at their own pace.
- **Integrating and Connecting:** Learning must encourage the integration of new knowledge into the learner’s existing knowledge base and clearly connect to the real world.

Discovery learning activities tap into learners’ brainpower, accelerating the learning process and resulting in higher levels of retention than more traditional learning approaches.

With learning time in short supply, and learning in great demand, discovery learning can help organizations offer training that works quickly — and well.

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