

CASE STUDY (3)

USING THE DIVERSITY ICEBREAKER QUESTIONNAIRE IN ON-TO-ONE INTERCULTURAL TRAININGS WITH EXPATS

Consultant/case author:

Marianna A. Crestani

Areas:

cross-cultural trainings, self-understanding

Brief

During my experience as an intercultural trainer I have had and still have the opportunity to experience the world of global mobility by delivering a number of face to face intercultural workshops to expats either prior to their assignment or at the early stage of it.

Ever since I started delivering these workshops I felt that a strong element of introspection was missing from the standard contents and, therefore, started using the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire to fill in this gap and add a highly valuable element to both the expat's and my personal experience with the trainings.

This paper is written as one case study, but it builds on my experience with using DI with different people on similar premise and objectives. It explores the different steps I go through while using the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire in one-to-one contexts thus throwing some interesting and new insights into another aspect of this highly flexible tool.

The world of global mobility

The world of global mobility has been at the centre of the work and thinking of a number of relocation companies that provide support to professionals and their families making transitions in cross-cultural environments.

Though differences can be observed between the content of the trainings offered by the different companies, the main structure of either a one or a two day workshop develops around some basic areas:

- Cultural Self-Awareness
- Understanding Cultural Differences
- Country Specific Information
- Intercultural communication
- Adjustment issues
- Dealing with change
- Action plan

On the other hand, the expats that join these trainings walk into the room generally having the following set of expectations: a) a list of *dos* and *don'ts* in the target culture; b) speaking about culture and cultural difference is very often about stereotypes and clichés; c) daily living information about the target culture.

The trainer is, therefore, often seen as a living example of the people the expat will face after the arrival to the country of the assignment and the general level of expectations from the day is often not very high and confusing.

Furthermore, the agenda for the day is generally pretty busy and, in addition to a valuable content to deliver, the trainer needs to create rapport with the participant right from the start in order to create a trustworthy relationship that will enable both parties to get the most out of the day and make a difference to the experience of the expat....it is from these premises that I started using the Diversity Ice-breaker questionnaire at the beginning of the workshops.

Action

Given the outlined challenges and opportunities that come with a one or two day intercultural workshop for expats, the starting point is breaking the ice, creating rapport and positioning the training at a much deeper level than a list of dos and don'ts.

Step 1 - culture.

However difficult it is to define culture (in 1952, the American anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 different functioning definitions), there is one repeating aspect of culture:

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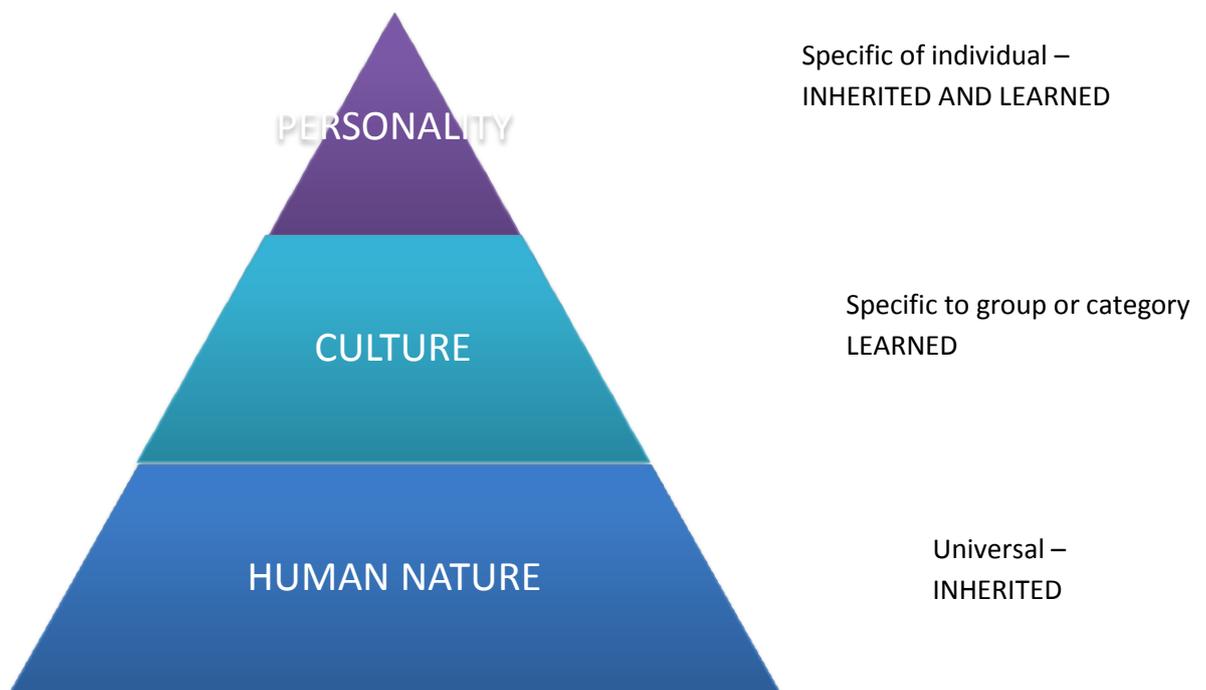
Culture is associated with social groups – culture is for a group what personality is for an individual, that is, a source of identity. Groups are important to us since they give us a sense of connection with a particular behaviour.

It is exactly from this premise that my use of the Diversity Icebreaker starts, i.e. by making the participants understand that culture is not just about national culture but it is about a number of affinity groups to which culture is associated:

AFFINITY GROUP	EXAMPLES
National	German, Italian, British, French
Regional	Northern/Southern Italy, Vicentino / Venetian, Veneto/Lombardia
Gender	Male and Female
Socio-economic class	Rich and poor, middle class
Political	Socialist, Liberal
Education Level	Secondary school, graduate, PhD
Religion	Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Jewish
Age	Different generations
Physical ability	Deaf, blind, wheelchair
Sexual orientation	Gay, lesbian, bisexual
Organizational	Organization that you work for
Functional	HR, Project Management, Information Systems

By doing this, I position the training at a much deeper but also more ‘tangible level’ since I touch the very first layers of culture with which an expat introduces him/herself: country of origin, target country on the one hand and organization and functional culture on the other.

But culture is also linked to personality and to human nature as G. Hofstede in his Human Mental Programming layers reminds us of:



And this is the second starting point from which my use of the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire in this context develops: getting the participant to understand that the training is not going to be an exploration of stereotypes but a journey into the way his/her learned culture has affected his/her learned and inherited personality and will affect his/her international experience during the assignment. Furthermore, it enables me to introduce one fundamental issue of the intercultural context which is the understanding that the same layers apply to the target culture but also the possibility to trace everything back to a common starting point which is the basis of the pyramid – human nature – and which in ‘Diversity icebreaker language’ is ‘I am red but also green and blue’, ‘I am blue but also green and red’ and ‘I am green but also red and blue’.

Step 2 – questionnaire.

After exploring the participant’s background and expectations from the day and outlining the agenda in broad terms I introduce the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire by saying that it is a psychological questionnaire that will allow us in little time to set the basis for the day while exploring the candidate’s perceptions of him-/herself but also of others and of how others may see him/her.

During the following 10 minutes I generally ask the participant to read the statements of the questionnaire and address possible language issues, afterwards I go through the instructions and get

the participant to complete the questionnaire; after he or she is finished, I explain the scoring guidelines.

Step 3 – meaning of the colours.

Once the participant sees his/her score and asks for explanations, I divert his/her attention and ask the following questions:

1) *When you think of blue what are the very first things that come to your mind?*

The answers usually revolve around things like:

- The sky
- The sea
- The ocean
- Anything that is endless...



While the participant thinks about these things, his/her mind and emotional state switch from the operational 'filling in stage of the questionnaire' to the creation of a meaning through a visual intelligence which generally increases their curiosity but also their openness to new ideas and inputs.

I close the reflection over the 'blue' by asking: *'Have you ever noticed what colour dress code is generally used in more formal organizations or professional contexts?'*

And the answer is:

- black
- grey
- blue

So, I ask: *'And what do formal organizations remind you of?'*

- Structure
- Work
- Order
- Processes

I continue with similar questions and line of dialogue with Green and Red:

2) *'And what about the colour green... what are the first things that come to your mind when you think about green?'*

And the usual answer is:

- Grass
- Trees
- Vegetation
- Life
- Evolution



So I take the 'life and evolution' answers a bit further and ask: *'What comes with life and evolution?'*

And the answer is:

- Endless movement and change

- Creation of something new
- Dynamism

3) 'And, finally, what about the colour red?'

- Heart
- Passion
- Fire

'And what do heart, passion and fire have in common?'



And the answer is 'emotions'.

Step 4 – profiles.

After unleashing these creative and imaginative states of mind, I ask the participant to go back to the statements of the questionnaire and draw the profile of his/her dominant colour on the basis of some core elements contained in the relative statements. The link to the colours and, even more so, to the questions I asked in step 3 after the initial brainstorming suddenly makes sense to them since they make the following links:

Blue – *structure and processes of organizations* – logical thinking, communicating with a purpose, rationality;

Green – *life and evolution* – creativity, imagination, big picture;

Red – *heart and passion* – emotions, interaction, getting energy from being with other people.

I then ask them to do the same with the other two non-dominant colours that have resulted from their scoring thus obtaining a clear overview of the three profiles.

Descriptions of the **Blue**, **Red** and **Green** Dimensions



Step 5 – connecting colours.

At this stage, generally the participant starts making spontaneous connections, such as:

- 'I am a project manager... therefore I really see myself in the blue description';
- 'I am from Latin America... therefore I understand why my dominant colour is red';
- 'I work in marketing.. therefore I need to be green';
- 'I am a woman...and I now understand why I more 'red' in my home and more 'blue' at work, etc...

These reflections are particularly important since they enable the participants to understand the initial reflections made about the different layers of culture, the Human Mental Programming theory and to see that although they generally have one dominant colour they are also... Red, Blue or Green, and conclude that same as there's no black or white, there's no 'only Red, only Green, only Blue'.



While the participants start making connections and reflections upon themselves, it is important to shift the attention to the other core element of the questionnaire and of cross-cultural dynamics:

1. What are the main features of the other colour groups?
2. How do the other colour groups see you?
3. How do you see the other colour groups?
4. What tips would you give to the other colour groups to successfully interact and work with you?
5. What should you within your dominant colour group be careful of if you 'have too much of it'?

And I get them to answer these questions by filling in the table below:

DIVERSITY ICEBREAKER

	BLUE PROFILE	RED PROFILE	GREEN PROFILE
Main features 			
What you need to be careful  of			
You are seen as 			
Tips for other people 			

Step 6 – closure.

At this final wrap up stage, I stress three important points:

1. Both in a professional and in a non-professional context we need all 3 colour-profiles.
2. These 3 colour-profiles contribute to the creation of a new concept of culture where national differences are overcome by colour commonalities.
3. Self-awareness of when we are more Blue, Green or Red is of fundamental importance for an international assignment.

Results

Though the described case study is based on personal observations and not on empirical research, my experience with the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire in face-to-face intercultural trainings with expats, have proven to be successful at all times. Furthermore, although I do not make use of the collective element of the tool with the group discussions and the positive emotional intelligence it triggers, it enables to reach the same goals:

- Break the ice;
- Increase self-awareness;
- Create a shared language to communicate and discuss differences;
- Ensure a safe psychological climate.

What else to say: it's worth trying it out!!

About the author:

Marianna Amy Crestani has been working as an Intercultural Trainer and Consultant since 2006 developing her own approach and material within courses that she runs both at an academic and corporate level. Italian by birth but daughter of a British professional, she has been brought up within a multicultural environment which has helped her develop intercultural sensitivity in a practical way and make her life experiences become her job. Founder of the professional partnership Synergyplus Training & Consulting, she is also learning coordinator for TCO International Diversity Management.

