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Bolten, Jürgen

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InterAct: The Conception of an Intercultural Business Training

Juergen Bolten (University of Jena)

One of the largest problems of intercultural management training at the moment is making possible timely and content-rich international enterprise situations. As a rule, these situations are conceptualized either with cognitive *or* cultural sensitivity; vis a vis they are made up of and focused upon eclectic content (and correspondingly without a consistent inner connection).

Due to the regulated time limit of the enterprise, this method is not conceptually effective. By the second day, this method allows for complex intercultural training that satisfactorily conveys knowledge of a culture and enables contact with situations in foreign cultures, but only with great difficulty.

It logically follows to develop intercultural trainings, which are, in this sense integrally constructed, and that also simultaneously allow the experience of intercultural interaction in professional fields. One such concept succeeds by the means of planned intercultural games, in which the participants--provided they represent different cultures--carry out semi-authentic occupational interactions, so that they may successfully manage future, authentic daily international enterprises. Implemented program phases allow for not only reflection on the interaction, but also the input of additional target and intercultural knowledge.

With "InterAct"¹, such an intercultural game will soon be published in both a German and an English version:

Target group profiles and training design

"InterAct" is based on the idea of developing a training for those target groups planning, with further development and preparation, entry into the responsibilities of international business. Since universal solutions are not possible and would limit training efficiency, what is attempted, above all, is finding the most common ground for all perspectives. The result of this is a target-group profile which contains both strong leadership and energetic new members of the business world that have less concrete foreign experience, but have integrated the study of ad-

¹ Juergen Bolten, InterAct. Intercultural Negotiation Training. Sternenfels/ Berlin (2) 2002

vanced business areas and practical experience. Members of both groups should belong, alternatively, to the fields of marketing, advertisement, finance, and/or organization.

Envisioned from this working framework, the plan's design makes interaction between up to four different cultural groups possible. Each group is comprised of three to five participants, with at least two of the participants being members of the corresponding culture. The remaining group members should already be familiar with that culture or have chosen it as their target culture. A basic negotiation level knowledge of the corresponding country's language or *lingua franca* will be assumed.

Corresponding to placement of participants, a list of the four groups can be chosen from the following cultures: Australia, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United States. Each of these cultures has corresponding training materials, written in each country's native language. Similar training materials for additional cultures are currently being developed.

1. Defining the target group profile

In order to produce an adequate framework for interactions, and also to guarantee effective coaching, the number of participants should be somewhere between 8 and 20.

Nationality of participants, native languages (at least two)?

Current or planned professional activities of participants?

Foreign language knowledge of participants (ability to negotiate either in the native language of other participants or in a *lingua franca*)?

2. Training design

The participants should be divided into two to four groups with 3-5 participants each.

The groups should differ with regard to dominant cultural origin and native language of the participants.

In addition to a supervisor-trainer each group should be matched with a "co-trainer", who comes from the corresponding cultural background and who will keep order within the group. (in the case of *Repatriates*)

Each group should have their own room available, with a telephone connection, if possible.

3. Case study options

A case study from everyday international business forms the starting point of the planned games. The case study should fill the following conditions or can be designed in the following manner:

An affinity to the professional abilities of the participant must exist (following point 1c)

The international context should correspond with the group division listed in section 2(a).

Here, a case study example with firms from various foreign countries is offered.

The depicted case should not be closed. Rather, it should break off at a “critical” point, which stimulates self-initiated trade and solution strategies.

Real case study examples should give only the country of origin, rather than the name of the participants involved.

4. Training negotiations

The training negotiation is created from the case study (3c) and will be fundamentally decided through the interaction of the groups/ventures in accordance with 2(a)/3(b). In order to receive adequate examples for the plenary sessions (video analysis and evaluation, input of knowledge, etc), it's recommended that the training be structured successively, in order to organize each closed sequence. The function of the training should be designed so that, the participants will know the background of their professional competence in relation to intercultural synergistic negotiations.

there is control over the method of interaction, which has a large probability of provoking a critical incident.

special individual and social aspects, in relation to intercultural competence, will be trained (empathy, toleration of ambiguity, communications ability, ability of meta-communication, fixing levels of acceptance, maintaining an objective distance from one's given role, ability to create historical reasons through culturally specific thought processes and behavior, negotiations in stressful situations)

the plenary sessions can be used to mediate culturally specific knowledge.

The Case Study Concept

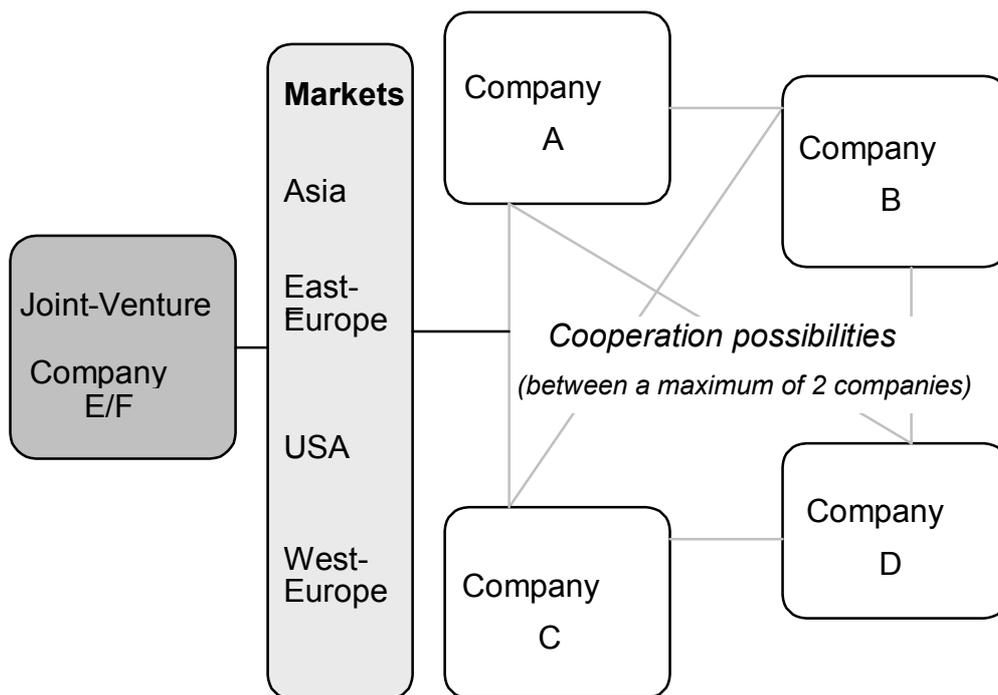
The case study forms the starting-point of the training and is to be worked through by the participants before the training actually begins. Briefly, it refers them to developments in the international market for sport clothing. Up until now, the market has been determined using a “westward” approach of each venture from Australia, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United States. Reasons behind joining two named ventures into a joint project developed from market shares indicating a critical way to avoid unsuccessful ventures. This will be described through detailed analysis of the sales markets in western and eastern Europe, Asia, and the United States before and after the merger.

The only possibility for the other InterAct ventures to survive economically, exists through working together and building co-operation. There is clear data for the case study work in the participants’ training materials concerning market-specific turnover development of all firms since the creation of the joint venture (first and second business periods). In addition, the material contains detailed information for all firms concerning specific positions on production and distribution technology, the “Break-even-Points” of individual product versions, and production capacity and specific organizational and leadership principles.

Training Concept

The training begins with the third business period and has as its premise the logical outcome of the case study. Participants have as their main goal, namely, the necessary formation of an international co-operation, in order to win back market-shares of the newly built joint-venture.

The joint-venture will not be actively included in the planned game scenario, but will rather be merely present in the computer analysis and evaluation curve of the following business period (*see below*). Consequently, the four training groups are represented corresponding to the cultural origins of the participants, and which are encouraged by sales problems to seek advisable ventures from Australia, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, and Spain. The following uses the United States as an example:



For the purpose of example, the groups listed above could be labelled as follows:

Company A: German

Company B: British

Company C: French

Company D: Russian

The joint-venture (E/F) would be formed (as a given) from two of the remaining four companies, while both of the other companies would be excluded.

The primary task of the venture consists, with the help of the case study data, in choosing one of the three other ventures for possible co-operation. The company will be contacted at first by telephone, and a negotiation appointment will be arranged. By the end of the third business period, co-operation between the groups will finally be achieved. Ultimately, any company co-operating with another in these conditions is left completely open and fundamentally depends upon the intercultural negotiation competence of the people involved. Significant problematic situations in intercultural trade can therefore appear in many diverse ways. This begins by the choice of the negotiation language and, in the case of effects of the symmetry of the communications relationship, also concerns the dependence of the analysis of self and foreign images on economic factors or the meeting of varying negotiation strategies. As a result, additional

uncertainties will be created so that offers for co-operation by the other partners, that do not meet their own wishes, must be diplomatically rejected.

All successive training periods will end as the third business period does, in that sales decisions of the individual firms affect the particular markets—possibly on the more favorable basis of the first co-operative negotiation. Decisions will be formed from the basis of business management criteria and fall under the inclusion of current trend reports for relevant sales markets. They apply to the fixed price and planned sales volumes for the single product version within the markets. Each firm's conclusions will be recorded in writing. Based on this, and particularly with the aid of a corresponding computer program, the training leaders will calculate market data of the third period. This is repeated in each of the successive business periods, whereby sales decisions after the fourth business period will be made together by members of the co-operating firms. At the end of the sixth "InterAct" business period, which marks the end of the training, it becomes clear whether the joint-venture or one of the co-operations formed during the training can claim victory on the balance-sheet.

Although the computer generated component of the training are concerned with the "hard facts" and has only indirect connections with the actual learning goals of the training, its significance within the entire context cannot be underestimated. Generating additional motivation, which originates from the incentive to win, it indicates and fixes it clearly in the specialized area of dealing in a business context.

In relation to the "soft facts", a plenary meeting forms a transition to the fourth business period, which includes video production of negotiation proceedings as part of the training and in which all participants are personally analyzed and evaluated. Simultaneously, this is also the place to discuss corresponding problems of intercultural trade cognitively, and to generate knowledge input according to cultural specifications. Similarly, the successive plenary meetings are connected with and follow the close of each training period. The time intensity of the plenary meetings can vary according to background knowledge of the participants and their input in regards to questions in the areas of "culture conditions of communicative styles," "intercultural synergy," "defining borders between local and global trade," and "cultural conditions of leadership styles."

At this time the integration of these cognitive phases in the training is crucial, and in which the fundamental principle is always followed: that knowledge input will be transformed first on its path to employment.

With this as the background, that every time both co-operating firms are structured on the grounds of economic efficiency and should be brought together into a corporate society, the fifth and sixth business periods progress slightly differently. For example, the joint-venture firms simultaneously propose management principles and develop culturally encompassing advertising campaigns capable of justifying the principle, “as local as necessary and as global as possible.” The developed designs are presented by the participants in the plenary, and a “prize” is immediately awarded, which is added to the financial results of the award-winning firm.