

Style Switching for Success with Multicultural Groups

by Julia Gaspar-Bates

Facilitating multicultural groups often present unique challenges that require additional preparation for trainers and educators. While an interculturalists' work is to help others learn about culture, it is also easy to forget to practice what we preach. In all cases, we need to do a careful analysis of the different cultures in the training or classroom, not only to determine the content of the course material but also to gauge how we should best behave to respond to the different needs and expectations of our audience. It is important to remember that having a "one size fits all" approach to training and teaching doesn't always work within certain cultural contexts. It is therefore necessary, in certain circumstances, to learn how to style switch to engage those students and participants whose style may differ from our own.

Being a trainer is like being an actor—you need to set the stage, improvise, when necessary, and engage your audience. Engagement, however, can be interpreted very differently across cultures. For some, it might mean being excessively enthusiastic, injecting humor, and literally putting on a show. For others it might entail a more subtle delivery that is heavily focused on in-depth content. Knowing your audience allows you to find ways to integrate different styles to meet everyone's expectations. For example, in the U.S. is it common to start a presentation in a light-hearted manner by using humor or telling a joke. This style would be perceived as completely inappropriate in a culture such as Japan or Germany where the use of humor could potentially cause the trainer to lose her credibility. In Japan, it is customary to apologize profusely as a way to show humility towards others, while in Germany, providing facts about your academic credentials to clarify your qualification to conduct the training would be the norm. One American trainer, well-versed in cultural nuances, adeptly addressed an American-Japanese audience by stating the different expectations between the two cultures and then apologizing for not telling a joke. This ability to integrate different styles allows trainers and educators to enhance their credibility not only as intercultural experts but also to fully engage their audience.

Style switching can be defined as the ability to adopt your normal behavior in a given situation to adapt to the predominant behavior of your audience to reach a desired outcome. It is useful to enhance your effectiveness when you are trying to realize your goals, communicate your ideas and successfully collaborate with others. However, it is different from just "going along" with a different way of doing things and abandoning your original intent or objectives in the process. Instead it is an intentional decision to adopt a certain behavior. This behavioral shift goes beyond the adage of "when in Rome, do as the Romans" which can be fraught with potential mishaps because there are too many cultural nuances at stake. For example, if working with a French group, you might observe people entering the training room to *faire la bise*, where they give a light air kiss to their colleagues on each cheek. If adhering to the afore-mentioned adage, it might be easy to assume that this is the appropriate form of greeting, however, while strangers may *faire la bise* in a social context upon meeting each other, it is only common to do

so in a professional environment once a trusting relationship has formed. At the same time, entering a training room in France and failing to greet each of the trainees individually with a handshake might also leave a negative impression that the trainer is disrespectful by not adhering to a certain protocol prevalent in French work environments.

The German writer, von Goethe once said “Behavior is a mirror in which everyone displays his image.” Our behaviors are central to how the rest of the world views us. As interculturalists we are already fully aware how they are shaped by the hidden aspects of who we are, such as our cultural values and beliefs as well as our personalities. However, the more we can be aware of the image we present to our audience and the more we can observe and inform ourselves about the images others display, the more we can adapt our behaviors according to the situation. Developing self-awareness requires a keen desire to explore what makes us tick. This means that the more we can articulate how our values, beliefs, and attitudes shape our approach to facilitation, the more we can be aware how they are reflected in our behavior as trainers or educators. For example, it is common in the U.S. to address workshop participants or students informally on a first name basis. When you discover different behaviors from your trainees from another culture, say someone repeatedly addressing you by your last name, you will be able to examine how your behavior may be uncomfortable for that person and develop a way to adapt, for instance, by inviting them to call you by your first name and asking them how they would like to be addressed as a sign of respect. This may be particularly important with participants from a culture that favors hierarchy and is status-oriented.

It is important to consider, however, that in all situations we need to work within our constraints of what we can and cannot do. Each of us has a certain amount of core values that impact our behavior and may be non-negotiable. For example, a Muslim woman coming from a society where gender segregation is the norm may have a difficult time shaking hands with a male trainer. Having an awareness of what is considered culturally taboo may allow the trainer to avoid an uncomfortable encounter that could cause a loss of trust and credibility right from the start. Conversely, there are certain behaviors that are negotiable and that we can more easily adopt because they do not touch the core of our being. As a trainer, it is therefore important to consider in advance what these non-negotiable behaviors might be and to take into account alternative behaviors to avoid these types of pitfalls.

Style switching therefore requires a certain amount of key skills to be able to do it effectively. The first skill, as mentioned, is self-awareness. Knowing your particular strengths and weaknesses as a trainer or educator, understanding your cultural biases and any stereotypes you might hold, and being aware of your style of delivery and how you interact with your audience are critical first steps to understanding your behavior. Along these same lines, being aware of the other cultures present is vital. If you are working with a multicultural group with five or six different cultures present, learning some of the fundamentals about those cultures can be useful. This might entail including questions during the needs assessment process to finding out about different modes of learning, to gaining insight into preferred communication styles within the group, to assessing any special needs they may have. If you have no familiarity with the culture, it might also be beneficial to do some preliminary research. This could also be effective

to integrate a nugget about the participants' culture into your discussions to show you are knowledgeable and to gain extra credibility.

Next, it is important to have a keen sense of observation. Observing interactions, group dynamics, and other behaviors will provide some indication of what to expect and allow you to consider behaviors you may need to change to create cohesiveness and participation within the group. For example, if you come from an egalitarian culture, such as the U.S., you might anticipate that trainees will take initiative to ask questions or share comments during a discussion. However, this may not occur for trainees or students coming from more hierarchically-based cultures. In this case, to engage everyone might require an additional effort on the trainer's behalf to invite people to speak and to give priority to participants of higher rank to speak first.

Finally, style switching demands flexibility as well as adaptability and a certain amount of energy to do it effectively. When we have a strong emotional investment in a certain behavioral style, it is often more challenging for us to effectively switch this style to one that is more culturally appropriate in certain contexts. An example might be if you tend to prefer a more informal atmosphere in the training or classroom that invites open dialogue and self-disclosure and you are working with a group that prefers a more structured and formal environment with a more didactic approach to the training. This can put additional pressure on the trainer or teacher as it requires a complete shift in teaching style to a more lecture-based approach where there is lesser risk for the trainees to make themselves vulnerable. A carefully written role play that you believe to be a valuable learning activity may therefore need to be abandoned at the last minute if you realize that your group will not be receptive to acting spontaneously in front of other without advanced preparation. In this case, it will require extra planning on the trainer's part to reflect on alternative activities and to shift gears at the last minute without compromising the integrity of training's content. Additionally, allocating extra time into the agenda is always wise to take into consideration different cultural approaches towards time.

Lastly, incorporating some mindfulness skills, such as the ability to detach oneself from the outcome, can alleviate anxiety from the fight or flight response that often plagues people when speaking in public. Also, developing empathy and compassion for the challenges that your participants may encounter is central to helping connect with others. For example, there can be frequent linguistic challenges when working with multicultural groups with varying levels of comfort with English. As a trainer or educator, recalling times where you have struggled during an intercultural interaction for you may help you reflect on different approaches to communication. With this in mind, it might be necessary to slow down the speed in which you speak and allow time for longer periods of silence as your audience translates and contemplates their response. It is also important to be cognizant of your choice of words and expressions for non-native English speakers and to remain aware of face issues. Even singling out an individual in a complementary manner might have a negative impact and be perceived as disrespectful for participants coming from a group-oriented culture where there is a high degree of hierarchy.

In summary, our cultural behaviors are inherent to who we are and strongly impact the style in which we work as intercultural trainers and educators. While it is easy to assume that we are astute at adapting ourselves because we are so familiar with the topic, it is also equally as common for us to wear blinders. In particular, if we often work with monocultural audiences, we can easily get caught in our own trap and forget that our stylistic approach to training or teaching may not appeal to everyone. Stepping out of our comfort zone is a good opportunity for us to take stock of our behaviors and consider which methods work and which do not. It is also good practice for us to develop a repertoire of different behavioral styles that we can apply, when necessary, to allow us to truly “walk our talk.”