

# Why American Training Techniques Don't Translate

## Preparation Is Key When Taking Your Training Abroad

by Char LeMaire of Traveling Coaches

To paraphrase American comedian and actor Steven Wright's famous quote "It's a small world, but I wouldn't want to train it."

My first experience training in foreign countries came in 1980. After graduating as a top student in my American company's one-week intensive "train the trainer" course, I was shipped overseas to offer training courses to clients in Germany, Britain, The Netherlands, Greece, Italy and Belgium. I was 24 years old and fearless.

Fearless quickly turned to fearful. My first client-site training class was less than spectacular. The prepackaged training materials did not work. The questioning techniques that I learned in my "train the trainer" course fell on deaf ears. Getting learners to volunteer answers was often impossible. What was I doing wrong?

In the years since that experience, I have learned that American training techniques and materials must be adapted to fit the cultural and learning environments of the client foreign office. As the chief learning officer for Traveling Coaches, I have had the opportunity to lead the efforts of our training teams as they have provided training to multinational law firms with offices in 12 countries, and I now know what I wish I had known in 1980.

### Success in St. Louis Could Be Failure in Frankfurt

Though any generalization is fraught with exceptions, it can be helpful to establish some baseline assumptions. In the case of German and French business cultures, for example, they are somewhat similar to those in the United States; however, there are a few key differences. Germans are comfortable with American-style training that is well-structured and has a tight, logical flow and a rapid pace. They prefer methodologies that are orderly, systematic, detailed and analytical. What works well with Germans are exercises where they can organize the information and present it back to the instructor and the group.

The French prefer a slower pace and find our American style of training too cursory. The French enjoy discussion and like to argue the merits of a topic. Allow more time for this type of interaction when working with learners in France. The French prefer lively group activities such as brainstorming to solve problems.

For most American trainers, Asian cultural learning environments present the greatest challenges. Asian culture values harmony and avoidance of conflict. Harmony in the classroom comes from conforming to the group. This is very

different from our American culture of individualism. Asian cultures place a high value on teamwork. Role playing, role reversal and "pretend" scenarios may not work well as these types of activities put the spotlight on the individual. Exercises that strip participants of their status and personal position can cause embarrassment and confusion. Never single out anyone to answer questions. The best participative training methods for Asian countries are small group-oriented activities with participants of similar ages and status. This allows the participants to work together and then present the answers and respond as a team.

Asian cultures have a high respect for authority. They consider the trainers to be experts that speak absolute truth. Best advice: Always start with formal-style training by lecturing, showing and repeating. Have written, step-by-step exercises, and use them in team settings. Asian students expect the trainer to be well-prepared and stick to the schedule. Use a manual or outline, and follow it to the letter. "Winging it" shows a lack of respect for the participants.

Finally, Asian learners much prefer to learn by rote. They will feel more comfortable with methods where the instructor demonstrates the skill and then provides written instructions for the learners to perform on their own. They will not be comfortable with any type of learn-by-doing approach. Eliminate the risk of failure for these learners, as failure equates to "losing face."

### Speak the Culture

Ninety-five percent of foreign office training is conducted in English. While language barriers can cause some problems, failure most often occurs when the trainer tries to apply tried-and-true American teaching techniques in a foreign environment. While trainers may not need to speak the language, they do need to "speak" the culture. What are some of the cultural differences that can make our American style of training miss the mark in the foreign offices of our law firms?

Using humor is risky. For those of you who have heard me speak, you know I have a very dry sense of humor that works well here in the U.S. However, it does not fly in all other countries.

Don't "wing it." Having conducted classroom training for more than 25 years, I must admit that I sometimes "wing it." But this method of training can be perceived as unprofessional in many cultures where learners expect their instructors to teach with authority and power. They expect their trainers to demonstrate their preparation.

●● Be careful of questioning techniques. I love students that volunteer to answer questions, so I often start questions with, “Who can tell me...?” If you’ve tried this before with some of your Asian offices, you know it is difficult to get anyone to respond. That is because in Asian culture it is considered in bad taste to show off your knowledge in a group. It’s considered bragging.

Remember, the definition of the purpose of training can vary from culture to culture. Words and concepts in one setting will often have totally different meanings or values in another. We talk about “core competencies” and “best practices” in training, but these terms may not translate to the same meaning in other cultures. You should also look out for jargon or technical terms that may not translate well. Consider posting a technical glossary in the classroom or making it a part of your handouts.

### Best Practices in Global Training

In general, preparedness is key. It’s a good idea to take a little time to learn about the country’s other cultural differences. You might also learn at least a few basic phrases in the native language of your learners such as “good morning” or “thank you.” But no matter how much you think you’ve learned, make sure to address the issue of cultural differences at the beginning, and ask your students in advance to forgive any blunders you might make. This might also be a good time to explain your expectations, being specific about behavior rules. Let them know how you want to be addressed and how you will address them. You might also consider going over your background on the subject to prove your credibility, qualifications and professionalism.

When preparing for the class, it’s a good idea to take advantage of the knowledge and helpfulness of the local office manager. That person can be a good resource for identifying any potential pitfalls before the class begins. Make sure to run your ideas and materials by the office manager and let him or her know your expectations for how the class will play out.

Once class begins, bear in mind the struggle your students face. Not only are they learning new concepts, tools and instructions, they are also doing it in a language that is foreign to them. You might offer frequent breaks in lessons to allow participants a chance to internally translate the materials and let the information sink in. Learn to be comfortable with silence, which may be related to the cultural behavior of your learners who might feel reluctant to ask questions. In most cultures, it can also be useful to break into small groups, which can allow the group to assign a spokesperson to voice questions to the instructor, and let them work together to discuss the information in their native language before presenting to the rest of the class.

When trying to communicate across languages, it’s smart to use visuals wherever possible. Handouts and instructional materials are highly valued in many cultures, but make sure your training materials are well organized and that any handouts have explicit instructions. Poor materials convey the impression that you are not prepared or lack direction. Whenever possible, distribute materials in advance. This will allow the participants time to prepare for the training before they come to the classroom.

### Getting Feedback from Students

It is common in our classes in the United States to have the trainees evaluate the quality of the course including course design, instructor and materials. Feedback is used to revise and improve the training program. But trainees from other cultures might not be comfortable critiquing the trainer. Any suggestions or criticisms might imply a lack of confidence in the authority and expertise of the trainer and be perceived as rude.

The best way to receive feedback is to designate one person to whom the trainees can provide their feedback. The local office manager can assist you with this designation. Be sure the group sees him or her as a leader. The trainee comments would then be communicated by this person to the office manager.

### Plan for the Unexpected

As trainers, we all know that the desired result of our training, whether at home or abroad, is essentially the same: to teach the skills needed to enhance employee productivity and to create an environment for successful learning of these skills. But when training abroad, we must be willing to modify our ideas and approaches. The best way to ensure a successful training session is to prepare as much as possible and, once on site, be patient with your students and listen to them carefully. Remember, to the rest of the class, you are the foreign one.

In the last 20 years, I have also found that the preparation for training in other countries contributes to my personal and professional growth by broadening my understanding of different cultures and sharpening my own training skills. So, embrace the opportunity to train abroad and do your homework. It will benefit your students, your firm and you.

About our author :: :: ::

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