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DELIVERING A FACE-TO- FACE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM

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DELIVERING A FACE-TO-FACE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM

Insurance Co is a large private insurance brokerage firm headquartered in the US, operating in the UK and a range of other international markets. The firm employs a total of 630 employees across its international locations. Helen is the HR Business Partner for the UK subsidiary. She directly manages a small team of two HR assistants. She is responsible for the delivery of all HR aspects in the UK subsidiary, as well as liaising with international HR Business Partners for the implementation of the firm's global HR strategy. The company operates in a matrix structure, meaning that all subsidiaries work directly with the US headquarters in several aspects of their business operations. For Insurance Co, developing intercultural skills in employees and managers is key for the effective collaboration between its headquarters and subsidiaries. The company's workforce is increasingly becoming diverse due to the company's ongoing expansion strategy in international markets. Consequently, employees and managers increasingly need to work with colleagues at the US headquarters and those based in subsidiaries across the globe. However, an evaluation of the staff's intercultural skills demonstrated that employees and managers lacked key skills when working with people from other cultures. There is no specific development training in this area beyond the generic diversity and inclusion training offered. Given the international operations of the firm and the need for all staff to develop intercultural skills across all levels of the organisation, the global HR strategy calls for HR Business Partners to collaborate in order to develop and deliver a leadership development programme for senior managers.

In January 2019, Helen was asked to work with HR Business Partners from the company's subsidiaries in Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong to design and deliver a joint face-to-face leadership development programme for senior managers. The first step was for the four HR Business Partners to develop the leadership programme by conducting a skills analysis for their senior leadership teams. Once this task was completed, the four HR Business Partners worked together to deliver the face-to-face leadership programme.

The face-to-face programme was delivered in London, UK. Forty senior leadership teams from the UK, Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong participated in the programme in October 2019. Helen, alongside the other three HR Business Partners, was responsible for delivering the three-day programme.



At the end of day 1, Helen noticed that the Bulgarian managers were upfront and to the point in their communications, which some of the managers from Hong Kong perceived as rude. She noticed that the managers from Hong Kong often said ‘yes’ without fully understanding what was being said. This frustrated the Bulgarian managers. Also, she noticed that the managers from Costa Rica were not always punctual to the sessions, with some of them arriving up to thirty minutes late. This was not taken well by the managers from Hong Kong who made the point that punctuality was a gesture of respect.

Helen decided to address the group and discuss the importance of *cultural empathy* with them. She discussed with them the significance of appreciating and considering the uniqueness of other cultures other than their own. She invited each group of managers to briefly present the key characteristics of their culture and then urged the group to openly discuss the similarities and the differences between each culture.

Helen’s intervention was positively received by the participating managers. Some of them realised that they were getting offended easily, while others realised how their actions may be perceived as rude. The conversations they had with one another helped them understand what they were doing and why. Also, it made them aware of the cultural factors impacting their actions and behaviours. Besides, they realised how their own actions and behaviours might be perceived by people from other cultures. One of the managers said, *“I know now that I should always try to understand where people are coming from and empathise with them, but also make them aware of their behaviour and how it might affect others”*.

Helen has now been tasked with designing and delivering a new leadership development programme with HR Business Partners from the United States, South Africa, and Germany. She now believes that one of the first steps in this new leadership development programme should be to address the meaning and value of cultural empathy.



DELIVERING A FACE-TO-FACE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM – TEACHING GUIDE

1. Synopsis

Insurance Co is a large private insurance brokerage firm headquartered in the US, operating in the UK and a range of other international markets. Helen is the HR Business Partner for the UK subsidiary. Helen was asked to work with HR Business Partners from the company's subsidiaries in Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong in order to design and deliver a joint face-to-face leadership development programme for their senior managers. During the delivery of the programme, Helen noticed that the Bulgarian managers were upfront and to the point in their communications, which some of the managers from Hong Kong perceived as rude. She noticed that the managers from Hong Kong often said 'yes' without fully understanding what was being said, something that caused frustration to the Bulgarian managers. Also, she noticed that the managers from Costa Rica were not always punctual to the sessions, with some of them arriving up to thirty minutes late. This was not taken well by the managers from Hong Kong who made the point that punctuality was a gesture of respect. Helen decided to address the group by discussing the importance of *cultural empathy* when working with people from other cultures with them. She has used this lesson to inform the next leadership development programme she will develop.

2. Teaching Strategy and Teaching Objectives

Students/learners will be able to:

- Understand the meaning of 'cultural empathy' and discuss its importance when working with people from other cultures.
- Reflect on their own culture and engage in a dialogue with people from other cultures to highlight the similarities and the differences in cultural actions and behaviours in a business setting.

3. Target Audience

- ✓ Undergraduate students in all business-related disciplines
- ✓ Postgraduate students in all business-related disciplines
- ✓ Employers

4. Questions for Case Analysis and Teaching

1. Why are intercultural skills in employees and senior managers important in Insurance Co?



2. Why did the senior managers from the UK, Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong have different perceptions over actions and behaviours during the first day of the leadership development programme?
3. What is the importance of cultural empathy for intercultural interactions in a business environment?
4. How would you go about delivering the next leadership development programme so that you can demonstrate the meaning and significance of cultural empathy to the international participants?

5. References and Recommended Reading

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DELIVERING A FACE-TO-FACE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM – TEACHING NOTES

1. Summary of case study

Insurance Co is a large private insurance brokerage firm headquartered in the US, operating in the UK and a range of other international markets. Helen is the HR Business Partner for the UK subsidiary. Helen was asked to work with HR Business Partners from the company's subsidiaries in Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong in order to design and deliver a joint face-to-face leadership development programme for their senior managers. During the delivery of the programme, Helen noticed that the Bulgarian managers were upfront and to the point in their communications, which some of the managers from Hong Kong perceived as rude. She noticed that the managers from Hong Kong often said 'yes' without always fully understanding what was being said, something that caused frustration to the Bulgarian managers. She also noticed that the managers from Costa Rica were not always punctual to the sessions, with some of them arriving up to thirty minutes late. This was not taken well by the managers from Hong Kong who made the point that punctuality was a gesture of respect. Helen decided to address the group and discuss with them the importance of cultural empathy when working with people from other cultures. She has used this lesson to inform the next leadership development programme she will develop.

2. Suggested methodology for 'solving' case study

The first step is to understand the meaning of 'cultural empathy' and its importance for today's businesses. The theory slides on 'cultural empathy' accompanying this material should be reviewed. The second step is to reflect on this understanding to think of ways in which Helen (case study) can demonstrate the meaning and significance of cultural empathy to the international participants in the next leadership development programme.

3. Possible answers

Q1) Why are intercultural skills in employees and senior managers important in Insurance Co?

This is an international organisation, headquartered in the US and operating in the UK and a range of other international markets, such as Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong. This means that not only is the organisation's workforce diverse, but also its customers/clients and suppliers. All employees, including managers, must, therefore, possess intercultural skills to effectively communicate with other parties.

Q2) Why did the senior managers from the UK, Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Hong Kong have different perceptions over actions and behaviours during the first day of the leadership development programme?

The senior managers had different perceptions over actions and behaviours during the first day of the leadership development programme because they all originated from diverse national cultures. National culture shapes corporate management cultures, as well as perceptions of expectations/obligations in a business setting, including business etiquette. Therefore, what the



managers from Bulgaria saw as an appropriate way to handle their communications during the programme, the managers from Hong Kong saw as inappropriate. Similarly, what the managers from Costa Rica found to be acceptable etiquette in the leadership programme, the managers from Hong Kong found to be unacceptable.

Q3) What is the importance of cultural empathy for intercultural interactions in a business environment?

Businesses are increasingly becoming 'global' through the increase in international trade. People are increasingly moving across country borders, creating demographic changes not only in employees/workers, but also in customers/clients and suppliers. A lack of necessary intercultural skills can lead to ineffective communication between stakeholders in business/organisational settings due to a lack of necessary language skills and misunderstandings due to different cultures, values, and norms. Developing 'cultural empathy' can help overcome these challenges. 'Cultural empathy' can be developed through acquiring knowledge regarding the values and norms of other cultures and how perceptions and behaviours differ in varying cultural contexts.

Q4) How would you go about in delivering the next leadership development programme so that you can demonstrate the meaning and significance of cultural empathy to the international participants?

At the next leadership development programme, Helen can allow time for the participants to get to know each other's cultures and what this means for their behaviour in a business setting. She can lead a discussion around stereotypes, prejudices and universal perceptions of people and assumptions about human behaviour. Participants can be asked to reflect on their cultural similarities and differences with other participants, especially in underlying values and patterns of thinking. She can discuss with the group that one's own cultural practices might not be applied by people in other cultures, and this may be best done within a broader discussion around the managers' national cultures and what this means for their own business practices and behaviours. This will increase the participants' awareness of other cultures and enable them to work better as a group.

