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Coaching Across Cultures

A common workplace challenge in today's world of global organisations is the issue of 'cultural differences'. Throughout our own international training operation, it is not unusual for our trainers to host a dozen different nationalities among as many participants on a course, and sometimes those trainees inform us that certain coaching approaches will not work within the accepted cultural practices of their country.

For example:

- some German managers told us that their society placed little value on overt positive feedback and regarded constructive criticism as a mark of approval;
- our Japanese trainer says that for her participants, our listening module becomes an exercise in how to interrupt, instead of how to listen, because Japanese managers might sit through an entire meeting in silence if not invited to speak;
- a manager in India shared that he had been afraid of losing authority if he took the '*ask instead of tell*' approach with his staff, but that when he gave it a try, he found that a coaching approach actually reinforced his authority;
- in similar scenario, some Chinese managers agreed to try the coaching approach only when begged to do so by their trainer, and then reported back that the coaching approach had worked better than their previous authoritarian style;
- in parts of Africa it is considered extremely rude to look people in the eye – which does not align well with our advice on how to show someone that they are being listened to.

In some cases, people have found that trying a different approach worked surprisingly well within their culture, and in others, they found that cultural habits had to be respected - in terms of leadership styles it would seem that there is no 'one size fits all'. But one thing we have noticed while training managers from all over the world is that once they successfully assimilate coaching skills, cultural differences become manageable or fall away. This is because coaching is 'coachee-led' – whenever possible, coaching managers listen and follow where their co-workers wish to lead the conversation, and are careful to repeat the same words and phrases

as the people they are speaking with. This creates rapport and new insight for both sides and is more likely to bring about motivation and alignment of opinion than arguing or directing.

Whenever someone says, *'This wouldn't work in my culture'*, we encourage them to try it out, in a relatively safe situation, and to learn from the experience. It is often the case that the new way brings a better result, and the 'cultural' difference was no more than the contrast between a coaching or authoritarian style of leadership that happens in any culture.

Cultural differences in team roles

Anyone who is coaching in organizations today, whether as an external or internal coach or a coaching manager, is likely to be involved in cross-cultural coaching, even if no difference in nationality is involved. As well as the perceived differences described above, a second set of distinctions emerges, in terms of personal preferences.

It is said that certain types of people are attracted to particular types of work, for example, extraverts make good salespeople, while introverts are to be found in administration, IT or engineering. More categorizations can be made through MBTI (Myers Briggs) type tools that divide people according to their learning, behavioural or operational preferences..

Again, the dilemma here lies in whether to encourage change or accept the inherent nature of traits that may be causing difficulties and misunderstandings. For example, a successful Head of IT functioned happily and efficiently with his team, until the time came when all the managers in the organization were asked to complete an 'Emotional Intelligence Inventory'. The Head of IT scored low in this survey, and he was consequently subjected to a number of well-intended training interventions in order to 'improve' his communication skills.

However, in reality this manager's style suited his teams, who all behaved in a similar way with each other. Being IT engineers, their way of communicating did not mirror that of, say, the sales people or the HR department. What this chain of events failed to take into account was that a key ingredient in a successful team is variety - not all the events at the Olympics can be won by the rowers, however good they may be at rowing. It is not even only the competitors who earn the gold medals, but the teams behind them who may be made up of coaches, strategists, sponsors, designers, sales teams, administrators, and planners – all of whom may be introverts or extraverts.

The cultural gap between people drawn to various roles in an organization can be greater than that which arises between different nationalities, and needs to be handled with the same care in terms of managing diversity. Similarly, where people's individual learning styles are respected, namely when they are encouraged to approach tasks in the way that feels most natural to them, their performance tends to be better and they feel happier and more confident about their work in general.

The same sort of differences might be seen in families, and the question remains as to whether certain behaviours are simply habits that might be improved by change, or preferences more deeply ingrained which should be accepted.

In addition, most people in organisations, and in the world in general, do not exist in spaces where they need only communicate with those similar to themselves. This is where coaching can provide what seems like a universal language - the 'Esperanto' of communication. Coaching

skills build bridges across gulfs of misunderstanding, whether between people of contrasting personality types or different nationalities.

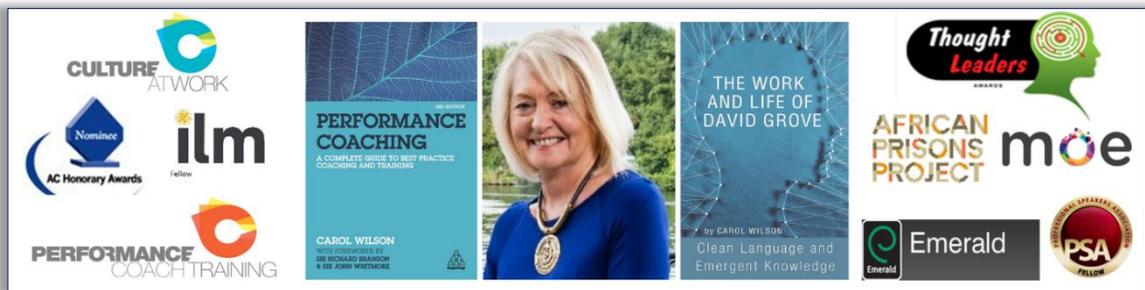
We encourage people not to simply accept customs, habits or traditions, but to try looking at things in a different way. Our advice as coaches is to:



References

Wilson, C. (2020) **Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training** London, Kogan Page.

About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of '*Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training*', now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and '*The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge*'. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.