International Culture in Industry Training: 
A Corporate Myth or a Necessity?

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Introduction

Many changes throughout the corporate arena, both in the immediate and recent past, are bringing to light an increased need for cultural cognition in the “new world”. A post-industrial society, or more accurately an information generation is only the beginning. The new “world-order”, economic powerhouses, ethnic conflicts and a daily explosion of both knowledge and technology mandate a new look at industry training. Global business entities can no longer afford to ignore cultural differences, in fact even national industries consider this critical, simply due to the make-up of their employees or even more importantly, their customers.

Keiretsu is a Japanese concept for business alliances. To confront new challenges, the author has explored the principles of such groups and adapted Keiretsu to industry training programs. Relevant issues will be explored in the following segments:

- Identification of New Needs and Goals
- Fundamentals of Keiretsu
- Corporate vs. Personal Elements
- Progression & Development

Identification of New Needs & Goals

Industry training programs can be categorized into three general areas of centralized, decentralized and integrated systems. The centralized approach to training exists when the training function is controlled or coordinated from a single organizational source. This approach is very advantageous specially in those organizations with similar operations among various offices, divisions or plants. In the decentralized approach to training, control of the training function is relegated to various levels and locations of the organization. This training system is utilized where products and services are diverse and therefore central training can only be at general levels. Finally, an integrated approach occurs when parts of both centralized and decentralized systems are combined to best meet the existing needs. This is advantageous for most organizations; for example, the employees of a company may need to be continuously trained in the advances in quality concepts, but each division may have its unique requirements depending on its individual products or services.

It would seem obvious that cultural understanding is paramount in any of the above training environments. In a centralized training system, various employees from different operations and locations gather in one place. Such settings often include trainees from multi-national locations or international employees. In cases where
training staff travels to various sites (decentralized), again cultural cognizance is critical. It is fairly clear that the same holds true for an integrated training environment.

**Fundamentals of Keiretsu**

The Keiretsu is a Japanese style of business alliance containing two necessary elements in a Keiretsu relationship: business elements and human relations elements. It is through the adjustment of certain traits of the Japanese systems to fit our practices, that the American Keiretsu Alliance System is derived. To modify these elements to fit cultural aspects in training, we derive corporate and personal elements. Both sets of elements may be viewed independently but are fictionally interrelated in a comprehensive system.

It is significant to consider that when an attempt is being made to infuse corporate and personal aspects together, understanding international culture becomes central to success. If basic personal cultures cannot be resolved, training efforts would be wasted.

**Essential Elements**

**Corporate Elements**

- **Goals:** Goals can be of varying complexity such as focusing on minimal cost of a program to more elaborate issues involving newly developed equipment.
  - Constructive Agreements: Trainers identify areas of concern by analyzing expected duties. Short agreements can be made by addressing major concerns of interest from all parties.
  - Shared Resources & Risks: Resources are typically defined as time, capital, equipment and people. Each and all of these require commitment by partners.
  - Flexibility: Partnerships must consider the fact that members are not only engaged in the Keiretsu activity, but may also be engaged in other efforts, whether different partnerships or otherwise.
  - Improved Learning: Through other association and experiences, training members can learn new methods and ideas. Each organization has its own learning curve based on its unique characteristics. Improved learning can yield higher productivity in training efforts.

**Personal Elements**

- Mutual Trust & Respect: When a number of organizations come together, a certain degree of trust must be developed. It has been noted that trust starts in a cautious mode and develops in progression.
  - Atmosphere of Cooperation: All partnerships require a great deal of cooperation. Within Training Keiretsu alliances, this is more critical because success or failure of relationships is dependent on cooperation for achieving targeted goals.
  - Management Responsibility & Inter-Company Communication: Managers from individual training companies must be responsible for success of the partnership. Managers must communicate with their own company and act as a conduit for informative and supportive purposes.
  - Cultural Cognition: Cultural factors must be considered not only in the audience of training sessions, but also in training partnerships. Cultural cognition in training partnerships maybe due to each partner being in a different continent, industry segment, different geographical areas within the same industry and other factors (such as company size, management style, etc.). Whatever the variances, cultural cognition is critical to the success of any joint training effort.
Individual Commitment: Without individual commitment a partnership is not possible. Each individual must be committed to share his/her area of expertise for the advancement of mutual goals.

Progression and Development

We can objectively establish five different levels of cooperation as related to a cognition of international culture. It is critical to remember that this is a progressive approach, where moving from one level to next is dependent on the success of the previous level.

Basic Level: The system begins with the establishment of goals. Together with the development of mutual trust and respect, a basic level of cooperation is achieved. An example of this level might be where two or more organizations join forces in training their workforce on a single topic of mutual significance, e.g. basic safety requirements mandated by an export country’s regulations.

Principal Level: Constructive agreements are now negotiated and some level of personal cooperation is developed. Readers may find this level beneficial in applying market and product training to their unique situations in a given industry or country. It is significant to remember that such joint efforts will probably be for single topical areas.

Median Level: To take joint training efforts one step further, corporations can now begin to share resources as well as risks which involves a significant degree of management responsibility; with inter-organizational communication gaining prominence. This level may be of particular use to joint efforts requiring significant degree of investment in equipment, expertise and people. Programs can be designed whereby the equipment and human resources of several entities in a new cultural environment are combined to satisfy training needs in a technological development which is new to the target customer such as automated information gathering for quality efforts, or conversion of a defense-related plant to a consumer products company in a formerly east-block country.

Mature Level: At this level, we are beginning to develop a common training philosophy within one or more segments that business partners are involved with. To achieve such cooperation, certain degree of flexibility must be considered for each partner as needs and resources vary. Only with such flexibility, can we also begin to have a cognition of each others’ culture. Such cooperation can be constructed whereby comprehensive training requirements of all members are given adequate attention and used to build a common philosophy. This is a critical step in understanding international cultures and all the previous levels must have been accomplished successfully. An example might be where an organization like Dana Corporation needs to conduct joint training in its more than 30 multinational subsidiaries. Since the advent of educational technology allows distance training, this level is becoming more widely used.

Ideal Level: This level of training alliance is very difficult to achieve due to its all inclusive nature. Once the previous levels have been reached, all partners will have improved their learning and developed a high degree of individual and organizational commitment to the common mission. For example, several organizations who are competing against global competition may reach such level of joint programming. U.S. auto industry may reach this level in their development of electric or alternative fuel vehicle and the human resource development needs that such undertakings encompass. It is critical to remember that an ideal level of cooperation often includes sharing of resources beyond training and including sensitive areas of product research and development. This is obviously impossible without a firm cultural understanding.
Conclusion

Training is a dynamic process requiring conformance to changing needs. One of the most important “new” needs in today’s global industry environment is international culture. Those methods adopted and used in domestic settings will probably not work in other nations. At the same time, what is productive for native born engineers will probably be less useful to foreign-born engineers; an increasingly significant part of our specialized work force. We can no longer plead ignorance on cultural issues and must give such concerns prominence on our training agenda. Within the context, reader comments and questions will be highly appreciated.

References


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