


Absence of Cultural Awareness Training in International Non-Governmental Organizations

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NGO: non-governmental organization

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Abstract

Introduction: Cultural awareness can be defined as an understanding of the differences that exist between cultures. This understanding is a crucial first step towards the development of cultural sensitivity, a willingness to accept those differences as having equal merit, and becoming operationally effective when working within different cultures. The benefits of cultural awareness have become apparent in recent decades, including within governments, militaries, and corporations. Many organizations have developed cultural awareness training for their staffs to improve cross-cultural cooperation. However, there has not been a large movement toward cultural sensitivity training among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who provide aid globally, across a number of countries and cultures. Cultural awareness can be a useful tool which enables an NGO to better serve the populations with which they engage.

Problem: The goal of this study was to evaluate the presence of cultural awareness training for employees and volunteers working within international NGOs.

Methods: Ten of the largest international NGOs were identified. Their websites were evaluated for any mention of training in cultural awareness available to their employees and volunteers. All ten were then contacted via their public email addresses to find out if they provide any form of cultural awareness training.

Results: Of the ten NGOs identified, none had any publicly available cultural awareness training on their websites. One NGO dealt with cultural awareness by only hiring local staff, who were already a part of the prevalent culture of the area. None of the others who responded provided any cultural awareness training.

Conclusion: Cultural awareness is a vital tool when working internationally. Large NGOs, which operate in a wide-range of cultures, have an obligation to act in a culturally aware and accepting manner. Most large NGOs currently lack a systematic, robust cultural awareness training for their employees and volunteers.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the concepts surrounding cultural awareness have been clarified, and the benefits of a culturally aware organization have slowly been realized. Numerous organizations, from international corporations to Departments of State to military forces, have adopted cultural awareness programs in an effort to better function both within their organizations and throughout the world with which they interact.^{1–3} While there has been debate about the effectiveness of specific trainings, it is generally accepted that a training program on cultural awareness can make a difference in the effectiveness of an organization's staff.⁴

Cultural awareness has been defined in numerous ways, but the core concepts include an understanding of one's own heritage and culture, and how that affects perceptions of self, and how one interacts with others. It also includes an understanding of how one's cultural differences and sociopolitical realities influence the interactions one has with other groups, as well as with members of those groups.⁵ Heritage and culture are a driving force behind individual human behavior and shape the way one interacts with the world around them.⁶ Additionally, there are a number of terms with overlapping meanings which all pertain to various aspects of cultural awareness. Cross-cultural competence, intercultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural communication all deal with varying facets of the same core concepts of understanding and cooperation.

Intergroup contact theory is based on the idea that increased contact with another group decreases prejudiced perceptions and contributes to tolerance. However, this has been found to be contingent upon multiple factors, including common goals, intergroup cooperation, equal status of both groups, and the support of authorities.⁷ All of these factors can be optimized by a non-governmental organization (NGO) when it deploys staff to a new culture.

As the world has become more interconnected, more and more organizations are functioning across multiple cultures. Failure to successfully function within cultures other than one's own can be devastating to the effectiveness to an organization.² With this in mind, organizations of all types and sizes which function in other cultures would benefit from a focused program to train their staff to effectively function internationally.

However, there is a dearth of literature on cultural awareness training among international NGOs.⁸ While there has been research into cultural sensitivity from the public health sector, information from studies such as these should inform the creation of public health programs implemented by NGOs.⁹ There must be a focus on creating cultural awareness and sensitivity among staff, as well as in the over-arching programming. The majority of research on international cultural competence from a human resources perspective surrounds corporations and the idea of expatriate failure, a staff member returning to their home culture prior to their original timeline due to some issue integrating with the host culture. Why the trend in cultural awareness training has bypassed this sector has yet to be explored.^{2,4,8}

Methods

A list of NGOs operating internationally was created and limited to those which work in more than one region, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO; Geneva, Switzerland). This list was narrowed to those which work in, and hire staff and/or volunteers from, multiple nations. As the goal of this study was to focus on large, international NGOs, this list did not include every NGO which fit these criteria. The list was narrowed to ten of the largest, most highly visible NGOs, as subjectively determined by the investigators. The focus on highly visible NGOs was due to the understanding that these organizations help to set the international standard to which other NGOs are held. As this is a preliminary study into this subject, no power calculation was performed. These organizations are listed in Table 1.

Once these international NGOs were identified, each page of each of their public websites were thoroughly examined by the investigators for any mention of training in cultural awareness available to their employees and volunteers. All ten were then contacted via their public email addresses to find out if they provide any form of cultural awareness training. A single follow-up email was sent to any organization which did not give a confirmatory message regarding receipt of the email.

Results

None of the ten NGOs identified had any publicly available cultural awareness training for their employees and volunteers stated on their websites. As well, none mentioned any internal nor recommended external cultural awareness training programs for their employees and volunteers on their websites.

Two NGOs responded via email. Four other NGOs responded via their websites. Four NGOs did not respond to inquiries.

One NGO replied to email inquiry stating that they make a focused practice of employing local, in-country staff only. This

Non-Governmental Organization
Save the Children (London, United Kingdom)
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Geneva, Switzerland)
International Committee of the Red Cross (Geneva, Switzerland)
Direct Relief (Santa Barbara, California USA)
International Medical Corps (Los Angeles, California USA)
CARE (Geneva, Switzerland)
Team Rubicon (Los Angeles, California USA)
Oxfam (Nairobi, Kenya)
Lutheran World Relief (Maryland USA)
Médecins sans Frontières (Geneva, Switzerland)

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Table 1. Non-Governmental Organizations Investigated

policy was adopted with the goal of having their staff come from the culture which they serve. Thus, they are deploying culturally aware employees and volunteers without requiring specific training.

Of the other nine NGOs, none replied that they had easily accessible cultural awareness training programs available to their staff prior to deployment.

Discussion

Cultural awareness and cultural competence are vital tools to any organization which plans to operate in multiple cultures throughout the world. International humanitarian NGOs, which operate in multiple nations and hope to give aid to a wide-range of people, are no exception to this rule.

Any training in cultural awareness should work at a deeper level than multicultural sensitivity as it is typically defined. Training programs must not only focus on the actions of an individual (eg, how to interact with the opposite gender within Christian versus Islamic cultures), but must also extend to the morals and ideas of personhood which underlie these actions. Well-intentioned efforts by US psychologists who have worked beyond their borders have been criticized for applying US-centric models and practices with insufficient consideration of the cultural sensibilities of the population they are attempting to serve.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, numerous workers arrived in Sri Lanka, most from high-income Western nations. They attempted to assist the population using their Western priorities and assumptions, which were different from those of the survivors. Many mental health professionals assumed that post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide would be epidemics, but found that there was no increase in the suicide rate, or in admissions to psychiatric units in the tsunami-affected area.¹¹ Better focus on the priorities and assumptions of the target population can lead to improved effectiveness of interventions, as well as better experiences for workers and those receiving aid alike.¹²

Methods of creating cultural awareness training vary according to the goals of the organization itself. These can include guided reflection, written materials, and/or multimedia tools.^{5,13-15} While one of the methods of creating cultural awareness which has been most thoroughly studied is cultural immersion, significant research has shown that numerous factors alter the extent to which time spent in another culture affects cultural awareness.^{7,12} The length of time spent within a different culture, and the degree of immersion into the culture, are both greatly affected by the length and setting of NGO staff deployment. Most NGOs frequently send staff on long-term assignments, especially in low-resource settings, which likely leads to a more immersive experience than

would be experienced in more metropolitan locales.⁸ Contact reciprocity is the ability for both the NGO staff and the host culture to benefit from the activities of the staff member. All NGOs can improve this by matching their activities to the local priorities, leading to a shared sense of the goals of a project and improvement in bilateral appreciation and cultural competence.¹²

Guided reflection is a key method for taking a greater degree of cultural awareness and competence from a cross-cultural interaction. Critical appraisal of the experiences a staff member has within a different culture leads them to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, as well as those made by the culture within which they are immersed. This leads to greater cultural awareness and competence. Guidance in these reflections can be especially helpful for those encountering a culture which is very different from their own, or who are in the initial phases of their immersion.¹²

Global NGOs include numerous major players on the world stage. In particular, international humanitarian NGOs fill an important gap between the needs of vulnerable populations and the aid which governments are able to, and choose to, provide. One feature which sets these organizations apart is that they function in many, widely variable nations, localities, and cultures. Many also function thanks to staff, both employees and volunteers, from a wide-range of cultures. Thus, it is important that these large NGOs function in a culturally aware manner, both internally within their own staff and externally with the groups they hope to assist.

This study demonstrates a failure of many of the world's largest and most visible NGOs to devote appropriate amounts of effort to cultural awareness. While all humanitarian organizations are commendable in their goals of aiding vulnerable populations, their missions could be furthered by a greater focus on culturally aware practices incorporated into individual staff training, as well as into wide-ranging programming. It is time for these NGOs to develop, and begin to employ, cultural awareness training to better prepare their staff to serve international populations.

Limitations

This subjective study comes with several limitations. Data collection came from two sources. The first was the websites of the

NGOs, which is limited to information which the organizations feel is useful for the public at large. This could lead to a lack of information regarding cultural awareness training. The second source was through the publicly available emails and question submission sites. Data from these sources are limited to the knowledge of the staff tasked with responding to inquiries. If these staff have not gotten any cultural awareness training, and are not empowered to seek out answers deeper in the organization, this data can also be limited. Additionally, there is inherent selection bias involved in the study design. However, these NGOs were selected for their size and ability to set standards for other NGOs throughout the world. While cultural awareness training may be more prevalent in smaller or less-visible organizations, the lack of standardized training in these NGOs remains a problem.

Finally, this study is limited to cultural awareness trainings which are performed systematically throughout the entire NGO. Anecdotally, some NGOs include cultural awareness trainings on a smaller scale, or at the sites of deployments. While these trainings are admirable and helpful, cultural awareness training performed prior to deployment, and in a more systematic manner, would ensure that all staff of the NGO was trained, and ensure that training occurred prior to the interactions with local populations.

Conclusions

In this study, ten of the largest, most well-known international NGOs were studied to find out about their systematic cultural awareness training for staff. Of the ten, one has a policy of only hiring staff from the nation in which they will be deployed, thus making cultural awareness training less-important, as the staff would presumably be culturally aware in regards to their home nation. None of the other NGOs who responded to inquiry stated that they had a systemic process for giving all of their staff cultural awareness training. Although many may have trainings which occur during a deployment, or on a smaller scale, this does not ensure cultural awareness throughout the organization.

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