



Improving the Cross-Cultural Competency of Offshore Teams

by Karine Schomer

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When I present seminars on Indian business culture to American managers and technical professionals involved in offshoring or offshore outsourcing to India, someone inevitably asks, “So what are our offshore teams and counterparts in India being taught about American business culture?”

The answer is, “More than they used to, but seldom at a level deep enough to inculcate the attitudes, thought patterns and behavior norms that would ensure optimal effectiveness in working with Americans.”

Training in “soft skills” is no longer as undervalued in India as it used to be. Growing numbers of Indian companies are coming to realize that the ability of their employees to communicate and interact more effectively is an important competitive factor. American companies in India are also showing more keenness to develop the business and leadership skills of their Indian employees and to move gradually from the cheap labor or staff augmentation model to one where the Indian operation is a value-adding center of excellence.

But how are offshore teams in India being trained to improve their cross-cultural competency?

Currently, the approach tends to be in-house programs developed by a local human resources staff that has often spent little if any time in the United States work environment

or engaging local training providers who offer generic programs on a wide range of “soft skills” topics. According to a recent report from Bangalore, local cultural awareness program providers are often entrepreneurs with a background in the hospitality industry.

While these may be worthwhile first steps, their impact is often superficial. The content of such cultural training will tend to be weighted towards form more than substance — more concerned with handshakes, business cards, dining etiquette and accent neutralization than the deeper core value differences that affect business culture and work relationships.

For American companies that want their offshoring or offshore outsourcing strategy in India to have the best chance of success, and Indian service providers that want to differentiate themselves from the competition through employees who are able to work well with American counterparts, I recommend the following six best-practice strategies for assuring that offshore teams will develop the required cross-cultural competency in American business culture:

Tip #1. Get executives to value cross-cultural training.

Build commitment from the highest level possible in the company that training offshore teams in American business culture is a valued (and funded) strategy in support of productivity, and assign clear ownership and accountability for the execution of this strategy.



Tip #2. Make the training a team effort.

Get involvement of specialized high-level outside expertise, the business units involved in the offshore relationship, and internal training and HR functions in developing the best possible model for delivering the training.

Tip #3. Bring in outside experts.

For best results, use training content and delivery by specialists with direct experience and in-depth knowledge of both American and Indian culture, as well as expertise in the field of cross-cultural communication.

Tip #4. Train on both shores.

In the case of American companies, provide coordinated training of the offshore Indian teams in American business culture and training of the onshore American teams in Indian business culture.

Tip #5. Integrate training into new employee orientation.

For both American companies with operations in India and Indian providers of outsourcing services, integrate training in American business culture as part of the regular induction processes for new employees. This applies not only to those who may be going to the United States, but all those who will be working with American counterparts, whether face-to-face or virtually.

About the Author

Dr. Karine Schomer is President of Change Management Consulting & Training, LLC, and leads the CMCT India Practice, specializing in cross-cultural training, change management, communication and management consulting for doing business with India. She has been involved with India for over 25 years, including 8 years living and working in India. She is fluent in Hindi and has in-depth understanding of Indian culture, values and business and social customs. She has been a University of California-Berkeley professor, dean at Golden Gate University, and Chief Operating Officer of the California Institute of Integral Studies. To contact the author, write to schomer@cmct.net. For more information on the CMCT India Practice, visit www.cmct.net/india_practice.html or call 510-525-9222.



Tip #6. Reinforce the training with mentoring.

Engage onshore and offshore business unit heads and project leaders in reinforcing the content of the training. This involves ongoing mentoring of the offshore teams in the elements of American business culture that need to be practiced for success in working with Americans.

According to Goran Strangmark, MphasiS senior VP and head of sales for North America, cross-cultural competency in American business culture may become an important quality differentiator for offshore global IT and BPO services working with or for American companies, justifying the investment in the development of this skill set.

“Market forces will tend to make Indian professionals and companies who adopt the practices of American business culture more successful, and they will outcompete their non-adopting competitors. But while we have seen successful examples of people doing it with very little guidance, this process can be a long struggle, and good training programs can certainly speed up progress and alleviate the pain.”

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