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Editorial

As any cross-cultural consultant will tell you, the challenges they encounter on the ground are by no means exclusively related to national and regional cultural differences. We all belong simultaneously to several social groups (nationality, ethnicity, religion, company, profession, generation) and each of these social units has devised its own set of values and behavioural preferences.

Oftentimes, figuring out what the real issues are within international groups requires stepping outside the traditional cross-cultural paradigms and looking at other dynamics that are at play in human interactions.

Over the past 20 years, a number of Central European countries have undergone significant political and economic change. In each of these societies, there are those for whom life under the Soviet regime is part of their personal history, and others for whom it is more the stuff of history books. It follows that in this part of the world, and indeed in other places where change has been fast-moving, the age of the people with whom we are interacting should be a guiding light for us to understand their concerns, viewpoints and expectations.

In this month's newsletter, Miguel, Senior Consultant in Budapest, reflects on his own learning curve as a trainer in Hungary.



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Training in Hungary: an enormous learning experience

by Miguel Sarabia, Senior Consultant

Training in Hungary: I knew it wouldn't be easy when I started out 10 years back, but I didn't think it would be a road filled with such twists, hairpin turns and heavily loaded lorries carrying years of cultural baggage.

An outsider would be forgiven for thinking that my own background would have better equipped me for this journey. With parents originally from Spain, I was born in Toronto already with the travel bug in me. By the time I settled down to a non-nomadic, family life here in Budapest in 2001, I had lived in or visited 65 countries. However, it was going to take me time before the secrets of success in training local groups emerged.

When starting out in front of Hungarian groups, in the beginning, I would see rooms of expressionless people looking back at me. Despite putting all my energy into encouraging interaction and trying to make the sessions fun, I was getting very little reaction from the participants. Facilitators in Hungary must be prepared to learn all the tricks of the trade and even invent new ones. I found it very helpful to attend local and regional trainer meetings, and to pay close attention to evaluations for hints on what local participants were looking for.

As time went by, I had opportunities to train elsewhere in Eastern Europe: Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, Croatia. I noticed similar reserved behaviours repeating themselves. This led me to consider how the shared past of these countries might in part explain the training-room dynamics. Gradually, the pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. The explanation to the reserve I had met was to be found in a goulash of history, politics, sociology and psychology.

As always, and particularly true to Hungary, a good starting point to understand the people is indeed History. This is a country that has frequently been on the losing side over the centuries and has suffered from nearly 450 years of unbroken occupation beginning with the Turks, then the Austrians, the Germans and from WWII to 1989, the Russians. Moreover, it wasn't until the late 19th century that the Hungarian language went from being the language of the peasants to a respected language even for the educated classes.

Training in Hungary (continued)

Though freed from the bonds of living under the Soviet sphere for 20+ years, the thumbprint of history lies deep in the minds of many Hungarians. It could be more than a coincidence that the words for foreigner (*idegen*) and nervous (*ideges*) are only one letter off! Given that thumbnail overview of the country's history, understanding the mindset of Hungarians becomes much easier.

Several cultural surprises are in store for a North American new to Hungary: the emphasis placed on physical appearance, the need to be different as reflected in food, music, clothes and nowadays even politics! All of these seemingly unconnected variables reflect, to my mind, the search for individual identity possibly not provided during their upbringing. The vast majority of Hungarians today were raised in an oppressive regime in which "*stand out in the crowd*", "*do your best*" and "*make your mark on the world*" were unmentionable utterances from parents. On the other hand, when asked what message he gives to his children, a recent participant from a pharmaceutical company replied: "I tell them that no matter how hard you try, there will always be someone better". Hungarians lack self confidence, and this lack of self confidence can lead to feelings of inadequacy. Now back to the training room.

Working as a trainer in Hungary requires a fair amount of psychology and cultural adaptation skills. How to encourage an interactive, dynamic environment while being sensitive to submissive behavioural preferences? One participant in a small group of 6 told me that "**just by being here, I've left my comfort zone.**" I've built up a repertoire of practices that help overcome obstacles:

- introduce calming elements such as music
- spend time greeting each participant individually at the start
- allow acquaintances to sit together at the beginning

- mingle during breaks even more than you normally would
- use easy English and explain difficult words
- don't jump into role plays too early
- avoid, at all costs, saying "no" if a participants' answer is incorrect
- never correct English language mistakes in public

Only when I deploy similar techniques does that famous Hungarian reserve start to vanish.

Now, we should point out that many of today's participants are much transformed compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations. Those between 20 and 35 are more competitive, individualistic, direct in their speech, and even sometimes at ease with conflict. Over time, as the Hungarian culture evolves and ceases to be a "transition" culture, I am convinced that training in Hungary will be much easier for foreign consultants. Getting to the level I'm at today has been an enormous learning experience and rewarding journey.

Mini bio: Miguel Sarabia



Born in Toronto to Spanish parents, Miguel is a well-travelled and experienced cross-cultural consultant. Prior to moving to Hungary where he now lives, Miguel spent 4 years working in emerging markets and visited or worked in 60+ countries. He worked together with national governments and private enterprises to promote Foreign Direct Investment into their country. Certified in DISC, MBTI and the Cultural Orientations Indicator, Miguel speaks English, French and Spanish.

Cultural Tips

Training in Hungary

- 1 – Read a lot about the Hungarian history and make/feel the connections with today's managers behaviors.
- 2 – Do not be overly affected by the Hungarian reserve.
- 3 – Introduce interactive activities progressively.
- 4 – Be sensitive to generational differences.