



Instituting a Competency-Based Training Design and Evaluation System

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The Centre for Intercultural Learning of the Canadian Foreign Service Institute is the largest organizer of cross-cultural and international training programs in Canada for outgoing government and private-sector workers. Four years ago, the Centre embarked on a process to review and redesign its training curriculum and evaluation systems, with the ultimate aim of expanding the systems to cover personnel selection for overseas assignments and performance monitoring after arrival.

Prior to the redesign process, several weaknesses of our training programs, and of most other cross-cultural training programs, were identified. In the first place, there was an *inconsistency* of content, as much of the course design depended on the preferences of individual trainers. Second, training design was somewhat *incoherent*, that is, not sufficiently based on a theory or set of empirical generalizations about what makes for a successful cross-cultural worker. In other words, a thorough competency analysis of intercultural effectiveness had never been done. Third, while a consistent core curriculum is desirable, there was not sufficient customization to individual needs.

Finally, although the programs were in some loose way using a competency-based approach (some general notions of what constituted successful performance certainly existed), they were *not easily evaluable* in the sense of having precise and observable definitions of the expected results of the training once the trainee had been overseas for some time.

Influence of Kirkpatrick and Mager on the New System

In designing the new system, the Centre was influenced particularly by two thinkers and their ideas in the training and personnel management field. Donald L. Kirkpatrick may be said to have inspired the relatively high ambitions of the redesign exercise with his well-known but seldom-practiced ascending levels of training evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1967). Robert F. Mager's advice for designing training courses and evaluations provided a discipline for putting into action Kirkpatrick's ideals (Mager, 1984a). Although our work was not initially informed by Anne Marrelli's research on competency analysis (1998), we do discuss and compare her work and that of Langdon and Marrelli (2002) with our own approach and results.

The Kirkpatrick Challenge

One of the best-known ideas in the training field is Kirkpatrick's (1967) categorization of four levels at which training outcomes can be evaluated:

- **Immediate reaction:** the degree of satisfaction expressed by trainees at the end of a course
- **Learning:** whether skills and information were learned at the conclusion of the course
- **Behavior changes:** whether skills and information learned in training are applied on the job at some point down the road
- **Results:** whether the ultimate organizational goals were contributed to by the training (for example, whether there was an increase in market penetration after a marketing skills course)

Unfortunately, more than 30 years after Kirkpatrick first outlined his framework, evaluations above the first and second levels are still quite rare. The 2002 State of the Industry Report of the American Society for Training and Development surveyed organizations and found that only 9% and 7% conducted training evaluations at Kirkpatrick's behavior change (9%) and results (7%) levels (Van Buren & Erskine, 2002). This was also true of our own field, intercultural training, where almost no fourth-level and few third-level evaluations have been conducted (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996). Our organization has been as guilty as any in this regard, but the redesign process was intended to correct that weakness.

The Mager Challenge

Robert F. Mager's works proved an indispensable part of our process for redesigning our training and evaluation systems, by reason of his insistence on a discipline for undertaking such processes (Mager, 1984b). It was arguably Mager's insistence on taking seriously the definition of a competency as measurable that enabled us to put into practice a training curriculum and evaluation process that we believe rectifies the previous weaknesses. We therefore regarded precision and observability as paramount in our exercise.

In essence, Mager reminds us of the following. Most attempts at a selection process, training design, or evaluation begin with fuzzy notions of what we want the person to learn or perform. Take the example of "The incumbent must be an effective communicator." Such important but elusive or even intangible notions must be "defuzzified" at two levels. The first operation consists of making such notions more concrete behavioral or observable performances that make up the meaning of such abstract goals. For example, a more concrete breakout of the vague concept of being an effective communicator might include the following: "possesses writing skills" and "possesses public speaking skills." These can then be considered to be, in principle,

measurable competencies to be used in selection or training design activities. But to complete the analysis and make the competencies genuinely evaluable, a required second operation is to define a further level of specificity and observability. By identifying performances or behaviors that one who possesses the competency would actually do, one has a statement that is evaluable (for example, "checks whether colleagues have understood the point intended").

A careful formulation of behavior-based descriptions of what a successful incumbent would actually do and say will be valuable to the organization in several ways. It permits the selection process to focus on assessing past behavior as an indicator of the candidate's ability to perform on an international assignment. Second, it guides the design of training programs to emphasize the learning and practice of specific intercultural and related skills. Finally, the behavior-based descriptions of successful performance now enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of our training in equipping participants with intercultural skills and knowledge, by moving beyond fuzzy performance goals at which anyone can look good and replacing them with precise and evaluable standards.

Profile of an Interculturally Effective Person

Prior to undertaking the exercise described here, the Centre for Intercultural Training had considered a plan to evaluate the impact of predeparture intercultural effectiveness training on expatriates' performance in the field. But this study was put off, because it was felt by some, partly under the influence of reading Mager, that a clear and measurable statement of the performance expected of an interculturally effective person did not yet exist. If you are being interculturally effective, what is it that you do or do not do, say or do not say, that would indicate to an observer that you are in fact interculturally effective. In other words, a proper evaluation would require an elucidation of the behavioral indicators of intercultural effectiveness.

This thinking, and a review of other sources, such as Kirkpatrick and Mager, led us to the development of a framework for selection and training design and evaluation, which we called a profile of the interculturally effective person (Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe, & MacDonald, 2001).

This exercise involved principally a one-week think-tank session (including brainstorming and affinity grouping activities) and followup consultations on drafts with a group of intercultural researchers and trainers, expatriates themselves, managers of expatriates, as well as nationals of host countries. A literature review of previous attempts to define the key components of intercultural effectiveness was also part of the methodology. Although some authors do not have a high opinion of the brainstorming technique (Langdon & Marrelli, 2002), we believe that it can be as useful as other techniques if it includes, as our exercise did, a prior

Excerpt from Director's Forward to A Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person

In 1995, I was asked to advise on a multilateral project to assess the impact of predeparture intercultural effectiveness training on development advisors' performance in the field. In large part, the goal of the research was to answer the age-old question in the training field: "Does our training make a difference in people's performance?" This is a laudable goal, but when asked for my advice as to whether the Centre should support the study, I responded, "Not yet." The reason was simple: A clear, concise statement of the performance we expect of an interculturally effective person did not exist... Given the many thousands of people who had been trained in intercultural effectiveness... was I asserting that for the past three decades, we, in the intercultural field, really have not known what we are doing? Well, yes and no. The research into the profile of the Interculturally Effective Person has shown that there is a common understanding among theoreticians and practitioners of what defines intercultural effectiveness, yet little exists in terms of a defining statement. What is it that you do or do not do, say or not say, that would indicate to an observer that you are, in fact, interculturally effective?...The real challenge has been to move beyond "adaptation," "coping," etc. to *actual behaviors* you can see or hear. To borrow from Robert Mager, we have attempted to "defuzzify" our descriptions of performance. Anything less would have meant we had simply reshuffled a comprehensive collection of immeasurable performances....

—Thomas Vulpe

Director, Centre for Intercultural Learning

literature review of previous similar efforts, a working categorization to enhance the probability that the brainstorming exercise will cover the waterfront, a wide variety of participants, followup consultations on drafts, and a willingness to review a competency profile periodically to make improvements.

This new profile presents an integrated hierarchy of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes expected of an interculturally effective person working in a foreign culture. It covers three levels of skills and knowledge, which we called major competency areas, core competencies, and behavioral indicators.

At the most general level are nine major competency areas, or the most essential qualities required of an interculturally effective person. Although at this level we are not living up to the meaning of competency as measurable in Mager's recommendation, the listing of these nine major areas is useful as a means of organizing the multitude of competencies and behavioral indicators and for quickly assessing areas for priority attention when selecting individuals for overseas assignment or for designing training programs. Their use for evaluation purposes is minimal.

The second level gets more specific and measurable. Some 30 core competencies flesh out and begin to defuzzify the aforementioned major competency areas. These core com-

petencies will serve as precise learning objectives in the design of training programs and are being used as such by trainers. But they are still not precise and observable enough for evaluation purposes.

Therefore, our ultimate level of specificity lies at the third level, that of behavioral indicators, which are conceived as behaviorally defined, observable, and hence evaluable statements of what an interculturally effective person would actually do and say in real life.

Figure 1 provides a visual presentation of a part of the intercultural effectiveness profile. Due to space constraints, the complete sequence is given for only one of the major competency areas and its related core competencies and behavioral indicators.

Comparison With Marrelli's Model

In 1998, Anne Marrelli provided a cogent summary of the competency-based approach to the analysis of personnel management systems, such as selection profiling, training curriculum design, and personnel appraisal (Marrelli, 1998). She took from the pioneers of the approach, especially David McClelland, the definition of a competency as "a measurable capability required to effectively perform work... to produce the results desired by the organization" (Marrelli, 1998, p. 9). As an alternative to traditional job descriptions based on a definition of desired tasks, a competency analysis identifies "the knowledge, skills, abilities, and enabling behaviors that employees must demonstrate for the organization to meet its business goals" (Marrelli, 1998, p. 9). The competency approach focuses on the desired qualities of the worker, that is, on the capabilities, work performances, or behaviors it would take to produce work outcomes rather than on the outcomes or responsibilities themselves that are typical of a traditional job description. The great advantage of the competency approach is its facilitation of selection, development, and appraisal, by defining what capabilities are to be sought or trained and developed in individuals and what is to be ultimately evaluated. In a less theoretical way than Marrelli, we believe that this is exactly what our profile has permitted us to establish to meet the needs of the Centre.

In a more recent article by Marrelli and Daniel Langdon, a more rigorous and explicit process for defining competencies was presented (Langdon & Marrelli, 2002). They recommend a two-step process, where first, six dimensions of any job are put forward as sources for identifying competencies (outputs or deliverables, intended results or consequences, inputs to be assembled, conditions such as regulations and policies to be followed, process steps, and communications or feedback). The second step is to define what competencies would permit an incumbent to accomplish or manage these

Major Competency Area	Core Competencies	Behavioural Indicators
7. Intercultural Effective Persons (IEPs) are effective intercultural communicators.	7.1 IEPs are able to convey their thoughts, opinions, and expectations in a way that is understandable yet interculturally sensitive.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.2 IEPs are not afraid to participate in the local culture and language.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.3 IEPs are able to establish shared meanings with local people so that foreigners and local people understand what is said in the same way.	7.3.1 IEPs attempt to enhance communication by avoiding any stereotypical presumptions about how local people would understand what is being said. 7.3.2 IEPs can identify both the values the foreign workers and local colleagues share and those they don't share. 7.3.3 IEPs have effective listening skills as evidenced by, for example, being able to restate what others have said both individually or in a meeting. 7.3.4 IEPs possess strategies for resolving an intercultural miscommunication, for example, by checking whether local colleagues have understood a point; checking that they have understood the points made by locals; or reformulating points to enhance clarity of communication.
	7.4 IEPs possess sufficient local language capacity to show that they are interested in the people with whom they work and interact.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.
	7.5 IEPs have an ability to empathize with, not just understand intellectually, how the locals see the world.	See Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald (2001) for details.

Figure 1. An Example of CIL's Profile of an Interculturally Effective Person (IEP).

elements of the job. This later model provides a valuable theoretical framework and categorization scheme for facilitating a competency analysis, and we wish it had been available to us during the course of our work.

Like Langdon and Marrelli, our aim was to develop a clear and measurable statement of the performances expected of an incumbent, in this case an interculturally effective person. The work of Marrelli and Langdon may be more theoretically developed than our profile, but in its own way, as a practical tool designed with our particular organization's needs for selection, training, and evaluation instruments in mind, our profile does much the same thing as the Langdon and Marrelli model does—and indeed in one sense may go a step further.

For example, Marrelli identifies the following as a behavioral competency: “[The incumbent in question will] listen

actively to questions, problems, issues, or concerns and respond promptly” (Marrelli, 1998, p. 12). Our profile puts it this way: “Interculturally effective persons have effective listening skills, as evidenced by being able to restate what others have said individually or in a meeting” (see Figure 1). The improvement that our profile makes over Marrelli's behavioral description has to do with measurement. How does one measure “listens actively” or “responds promptly”? Terms like “actively” and “promptly” are rather vague and nebulous compared with our standard of, for example, “being able to restate what others have said individually or in a meeting.” We feel that our profile is actually more behaviorally specific than that of Langdon and Marrelli, and its higher behavioral content perhaps gets us closer to an ability to carry out Kirkpatrick's elusive third and fourth levels of training evaluation.

The IEP Profile in Use

The development of the competencies and indicators in our profile of an interculturally effective person has provided a common language and set of reference points or benchmarks for consistent use throughout our selection, training design, and evaluation processes. We have now developed a selection instrument, called the Intercultural Living and Working Inventory, which assesses an individual's overall capacity to perform effectively in another culture. This

instrument will help organizations screen candidates for international assignments and identify the areas for professional development that need to be worked on to be ready to undertake an international assignment.

With regard to training design, our flagship intercultural course has been revamped by using the competencies and indicators in the profile as baseline measures and constructs for conducting needs assessments and articulating the baseline, terminal, and enabling learning objectives. In other words, the profile provides the performance standards against which an individual trainee's current level of intercultural skills can be assessed prior to training. Identifying the gap between actual and needed skills now permits a large degree of customization. We also give a copy of the profile to all course participants as a reference for helping them to align their behaviors with the learning objectives.

stage one:
“Waking up”

**Identify
the problem**

The field of Intercultural Training has never clarified precisely what it means to be interculturally effective. Training programs have been *inconsistent* on content, *incoherent* in purpose, and *non-evaluable* of results.

stage two:
“Action”

**The IEP think
tank session**

A “meeting of the minds”: a multicultural group of intercultural researchers, trainers, expatriates, and global managers brainstorm their way to identifying the behaviours of an interculturally effective person.

stage three:
“Application”

Selection

The IEP, by providing a behavioural description or intercultural competence, informs the development of screening tools and selection procedures.

Training

The IEP helps to identify the training needs of individuals and serves to establish the specific learning objectives (a la Mager) of intercultural training programs.

Evaluation

The IEP description of intercultural competence now permits us to evaluate our intercultural training programs for achieving results at all four of Kirkpatrick’s levels of evaluation.

stage four:

“Continuous Learning”

We believe we have achieved something very useful for our organization and have hopefully contributed to improving intercultural training efforts more generally. We have gone from relatively incoherent, inconsistent, and non-evaluable training programs to programs that are coherent, consistent, and evaluable. It is critical for us as an organization to remain committed to our process, to remain open to change, and to be ever vigilant in our effort to know what it takes to be effective living and working in another culture.

Figure 2. The IEP Process.

Furthermore, we believe that its comprehensiveness, precision, and behavioral observability will permit the Centre’s evaluations to be done at all of Kirkpatrick’s levels, especially the most important, the behavior change (third) and organizational results (fourth) levels. In terms of the third level, the prerequisite for a real evaluation of behavior change, that is, behaviorally defined, observable indicators that the content of training has been absorbed by trainees and has had an impact on their behavior in another culture, is provided by both the core competencies and the behavioral indicators in our profile.

In the case of the organization’s desired results (Kirkpatrick’s fourth level), these same competencies and indicators would be used, but would have to be supplemented by a parallel evaluation of the impact of other influences on the success of an international assignment in order to determine how much the measured results overseas are due specifically to the training. This would involve a much more complicated evaluation design because various moderating variables, such as organizational factors (for example, logis-

tical supports, clarity of objectives etc.) and environmental factors (the political, social, and economic realities that encourage or inhibit accomplishment of assignment goals), can be highly influential in international settings, especially in developing countries. The evaluation design would have to incorporate a methodology to separate the particular influence of training on measured results. This is a difficult task, but our profile makes it more feasible by having measurable behavioral performances as a starting point.

Finally, the profile has proven a valuable marketing and client relations tool, permitting our potential and new clients to grasp more clearly the tangible benefits that they can expect from our intercultural learning products and services.

Lessons for Other Organizations

We conclude with a few lessons derived from our experience of formulating a behavior-based competency profile for intercultural workers that may be useful to other organizations contemplating similar exercises:

- Have the courage to take a hard look at what you are doing, how you are doing it, and whether you are doing it effectively, and commit to having consistent, coherent, and evaluable programs.
- While a thorough competency analysis is a laborious and painstaking process, any organization should be able to do one without going much beyond its internal resources. (Figure 2 illustrates our process.)
- There is no need for expensive, exhaustive, formal surveys or needs assessments to establish behavior-based competencies. A leaner process, such as a focus group of knowledgeable people who are prepared to ask hard questions in a brainstorming session of no more than a few days, should yield nearly all the data one is likely to need. Any remaining lacunae can be rectified by actually using the tool in selection, training design, and evaluation activities.
- The key question, to be constantly hammered at in any such exercise, is, what exactly would this desired incumbent actually do or say, in terms of observable behavior?
- Behavior-based competency analysis reaps many rewards, including enabling personnel selection, training design, and performance evaluation to become an integrated process. In other words, it permits a more tar-

geted selection process that, in turn, helps identify training needs and facilitates evaluations to improve future selection and training. 🏔️

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