Top Five Solutions to Make Your Global Diversity and Inclusion Training Less U.S.

By **Shilpa Pherwani**

Global companies founded in the U.S. have traditionally exported U.S. approaches to project management, team design and communication to their locations outside of the U.S. Has the same approach been applied to diversity training?

Today's global diversity leaders are versed in the concepts of respect and inclusion, yet global diversity training too often disproportionately emphasizes race and gender, to the point of excluding other forms of diversity. The association of diversity training with race and gender has led to the international perception of diversity as a U.S. issue stemming from equal opportunity laws that are not be relevant in other countries. In cultures where race and gender aren't the dominant diversity issues, the U.S. centric positioning and communication of diversity training leads to statements like "Why are we offering this training here – we have no diversity issues in our country!"

For diversity and inclusion to be recognized as globally relevant, diversity training must extend beyond gender and race. When we at IBIS, a diversity & inclusion consulting company, conducts surveys with global companies in an effort to assess diversity and inclusion needs, we find that race is not a central diversity challenge for relatively homogenous countries such as the Nordics, Japan and Korea. In these countries, national identity, which varies by region and country depending upon the level of openness to immigration, integration and citizenship, is the more relevant diversity challenge. And while our surveys show gender as a relevant topic in every country, the historical and social aspects of gender diversity varies greatly by region. Responses to our surveys and work with regional experts indicate that diversity training becomes even more engaging when focused on diversity issues that are regionally specific. Examples include class and educational background in APAC, generational issues in India, religious issues in Europe, social class in Latin America and India, and disability in most regions (while recognizing the differing historical and social contexts).

Diversity training must also extend beyond a U.S. centric implementation. Diversity training typically uses U.S. based cases and scenarios and delivers training in English by U.S. facilitators. Literal translations and non-customized modular instructional techniques lack sensitivity to cultural and regional differences. Training often discusses the diversity of groups in polarizing terms, focusing primarily on the *challenges* related to working in a diverse environment rather than on the *advantages* of working within a diverse team that is able to effectively bridge differences.

Translating diversity training into a globally relevant service requires progressive steps away from these U.S.-centric practices. In IBIS's experience partnering with and assessing the diversity training needs for U.S. based global corporations, we have developed the following 5 training solutions to make global diversity training truly "global".

1. **Focus on common diversity issues that are relevant across the globe.**

Focusing on sexual orientation for teams in the Middle East can limit the success of the diversity training effort entirely. This is a time to focus the training on universal rather than diversity differences

These issues include: gender, age, thinking styles, work-life balance, disability, and cultural differences. If an organization has teams in the Middle East, focusing on sexual orientation can limit the success of the diversity training effort entirely. It will be more effective to focus the training on universal skills required to effectively work across *any* kind of difference. Training should provide tools and frameworks for employees in different locations to promote an inclusive work environment for all.
        One such tool is the FLEX model designed by IBIS to address cultural biases and promote inclusion, which can be viewed here.

2. **Use a variety of modalities and instructional techniques**

Implement different teaching modalities to specifically engage and maximize the potential of different learning styles. These modalities include: e-learning, webinars, instructor lead training, and theater based training, in which employees watch professional actors perform and then participate in a follow-up discussion.

Case in Point

While non-regionally trained U.S. facilitators initially lead sessions in global locations, these facilitators soon realized that their instructional techniques needed to be modified based on the region. For example, when conducting a diversity session for an APAC audience of employees across levels, we learned that because participants were often not comfortable voicing personal opinions or trying out impromptu acting, otherwise standard activities such role play and large group discussion needed to be modified to fit the cultural expectations and norms of the group. In APAC cultures, the facilitator is often perceived as a diversity expert and is expected to tell the audience the "right" way of addressing diversity dilemmas. We adjusted our approach while maintaining our message by having the facilitators provide the content for the group discussions and act out the role play skits; this shift relieved the audience of their discomfort while effectively delivering the diversity and inclusion message.

3. Connect diversity training to specific company goals.

Develop a strategy to communicate how the training will ultimately help with company innovation, productivity and engagement. Do not frame diversity as a stand-alone issue. The strategy of a business leader in India that IBIS works with is to position his company's diversity training under team productivity and effectiveness. This leader emphasizes business and production-based goals, reducing resistance from employees who typically perceive diversity training as just another irrelevant U.S. based initiative forced upon them.

4. Conduct region specific Train-Trainer programs.

Case in Point

In EMEA: *regional consultants advised we include religion as a primary dimension of training program*

In China: *focusing on the urban-rural/North-South aspect proved critical when discussing diversity*

In Mexico: *socioeconomic status was content vital and specific to this region; in India, regional consultants focused on class and educational background.*

Conduct region specific Train-the-Trainer programs.
Partner with local trainers in each international region to equip them with knowledge and tools to facilitate follow-up dialogue that is region specific. We develop our Train-the-Trainer programs' content in collaboration with regional diversity consultants. Based on their feedback, we insert region specific content. Our regional consultants spearhead our translation process to ensure our training content is regionally relevant and culturally sensitive.
Train-the-Trainer sessions equip local trainers in regions like the Middle East, UK, Germany, Africa and Asia with the awareness and practical knowledge to adapt their training to their regions while retaining core components that communicate a consistent message.

5. Do not ignore the "local diversity story".

Diversity issues in each region are different and each region has its own specific history and legal and social perspectives that need to be highlighted.
It is important that employees hear and recognize their "local diversity story"-- familiar scenarios, faces, terms and locations to which they can relate. A global diversity training initiative must be culturally-sensitive to be engaging or compelling. A US-centric approach may inadvertently subvert the intended message of global inclusion.

Case in Point

Not understanding the local story pertaining to the Kashmir region situated between India and Pakistan led to financial repercussions during a product launch for a global technology company. The company's product included a map of India that depicted Kashmir as non-Indian. The product team at the global technology company failed to not understand that Kashmir is the center of a sixty-five year territorial dispute between India, Pakistan and Kashmiri insurgents. The team at the global technology company that created this product lacked a specific piece of local knowledge that led to the product being banned in India and 200,000 copies of the product, worth millions of dollars, were recalled.

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