

# CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING FOR HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM: IMPROVING SERVICE ENCOUNTERS THROUGH INDUSTRY-TARGETED CRITICAL INCIDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Hospitality and travel combined have become one of the world's largest industries. The World Travel and Tourism Council states that these two sectors will contribute about \$9.3 trillion in economic activity by 2011. This significant growth in international travel over the next decade will heighten the importance of cross-cultural service encounters and reward companies who have trained their workers to a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. Training programs that use critical incidents specifically designed for hospitality and travel-related businesses will improve service delivery and reduce cultural misunderstandings between the organizations' employees and the customers they serve. Multinational firms in all industries have included cross-cultural training and critical incidents in their training programs for middle and upper-level managers in the past. However, front-line employees who actually make contact with the firm's customers are seldom prepared for encounters with customers from other cultures. The purpose of this study is to suggest ways that firms in the hospitality and travel industry can better prepare their front-line employees for successful service encounters with people from foreign cultures.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hospitality and travel is one of the world's largest industries, responsible for 200 million jobs and over 10 percent of global GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2003). No one would question the fact that this industry has become an international phenomenon of global consequence. The latest projection reveals that a quarter of a billion people will work in hospitality and travel worldwide over the coming decade with a continual growth rate of 4.6 percent (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2003). This tremendous upswing in activity has increased the likelihood that many American service workers in the hospitality and travel industry will have encounters with visitors from other cultures. The growth and very existence of companies in these industries will become more dependent on the success of these encounters between employees and foreign guests (Bhawuk, 2001). It is most important that these service interactions are successful and free of cultural misunderstandings.

Studies in the field of international business have touted the benefits of cross-cultural training for nearly four decades (Hodgetts, Luthans & Doh, 2006). Multinational firms from all industries have responded over the years, realizing the need for such training by developing culture assimilators for their middle and upper-level managers as they have prepared to send these warriors on foreign postings around the globe. Culture assimilators are a cross-cultural training strategy that employs a critical incident approach to present examples of culture clashes between individuals from different backgrounds (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). These headquarter nationals who often assist international firms in the early days of market entry and start-up operations are known as "expatriates" and research has

shown that cross-cultural training better prepares them for managing their new, foreign workforces mostly comprised of local, host country nationals.

Hospitality and travel companies have also trained their middle and upper-level managers as well in cross-cultural management skills as they have opened up hotels, restaurants and offices around the globe. But what the industry has failed to do is to train front-line employees who have contact with the firms' customers (Ferraro, 2006). Often times, these employees are minimum wage workers with limited education such as chambermaids, front-desk clerks, concierges, bellmen, waiters, limo drivers and call center reservation clerks and these workers are the only contact that customers have with the hospitality or travel organization. And yet, these workers have little training in service encounters with people from other cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest ways in which firms in the hospitality and travel industry can improve the service encounters of their front-line employees by incorporating critical incidents into their employee orientation and internal marketing programs. A critical incident is a short vignette or story that is designed to assist readers in making intercultural adjustments and developing more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in cross-cultural interactions. These stories usually present examples of culture clashes between individuals from different backgrounds. At the completion of each incident a clash of cultures is apparent and the two parties are unable to accomplish their task. The reader is then presented with several alternative explanations and asked to select the one that best explains why the clash has occurred from the point of view of the character in the story who is not a member of the reader's own culture. A sample critical incident is included in Appendix A of this paper.

Critical incidents are easily taught and understood by people with all levels of education and can provide front line workers with a way to improve their service encounters with foreign customers (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2003). Furthermore, if these critical incidents are taken from service failures within their own industry and are situations to which these workers can relate, than a more successful front-line employee will emerge.

Herb Kelleher, CEO of Southwest Airlines has often said that he runs his organization as an inverted pyramid. He is at the bottom tip of the pyramid and his front-line service employees form the base at the top! This type of organizational culture acknowledges that the most important people in any organization today are those workers who directly impact customer satisfaction. Hence, this paper stresses the need for such training at the front-line level and encourages the use of specific, industry-targeted critical incidents as the best form of training for these workers.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most American hospitality and travel companies realize the importance of international business. However, very few of their training programs present a clear picture of the potential misunderstandings that can occur when people from different cultures interact. This customer-employee interaction is the mainstay of the growing service

economy. When the international guest or visitor interacts directly with the service worker, it is at this time that customers often form their impressions and attitudes of the organization (Bitner, Brown, and Meuter, 2000). Since customer satisfaction with a service “depends directly and most immediately on the management and monitoring of the individual service encounter” (Bitner, 1990), service providers that measure and develop their employees through effective training will achieve better results.

Research suggests that organizations focus mostly on the dos and don'ts of service encounters and deal only at the cognitive level (Bhawuk, 2001), emphasizing the objective facts of the target culture. People looking for a career in hospitality and travel must be prepared for a multi-cultural environment comprising both objective facts and subjective behavioral considerations. Both of these contexts can be taught through well-planned training exercises (Serrie, 1992). This means that front-line employees must develop cross-cultural competence at the interpersonal level and achieve successful interactions with customers from many cultures. It also means that American service workers must know how their American values may differ from the values of those from other cultures.

## CROSS-CULTURAL SERVICE INTERACTIONS

Since conflicts between people of different cultures often occur when appropriate behavior in one culture is deemed inappropriate in another (Cushner and Brislin, 1996) and people are unaware of these differences, researchers have begun to focus more on culture's influence on service interactions (Furrer, Liu, Sudharshan, 2000). International visitors on leisure and business trips often expect service providers to understand their values and their cultural beliefs by exhibiting a certain level of cross-cultural competence (Katriel, 1995). If a hospitality or travel firm does not perform to the expectations of the international guest, a cross-cultural conflict may occur. These conflicts are often caused by cultural norms and values that are dissimilar between guest and service worker and can lead to a dissatisfied customer, a frustrated service provider, and lost business (Cushner and Brislin, 1996).

These service failures can be avoided because most hospitality and travel businesses have resources available to prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings. Furthermore, studies show that intercultural sensitivity—an attitude that enables a worker or a customer to interact effectively with people from foreign cultures (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992)—is an ability that can be measured and learned (Bhawuk, 2001; Cushner and Brislin, 1996). Research shows that heightened intercultural sensitivity achieved through subjective training can increase employee performance and result in more successful cross-cultural encounters (Sizoo, Plank, Iskat, and Serrie, 2005). This same study also finds that service workers with high intercultural sensitivity perform better on other measures, including service attentiveness, revenue contribution, interpersonal skills, job satisfaction, and personal satisfaction (Sizoo, Plank, Iskat, and Serrie, 2005).

## CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Cross-cultural training (CCT) has proven to be an effective way of helping service workers adjust to new cultural behaviors. Research has found that CCT can positively affect

the relational skills of workers in a cross-cultural context (Black and Mendenhall, 1990), while other studies have shown that cross-cultural training can have a direct impact on individual performance and financial contribution, as well as improve the long-term competitive advantage of the organization (Huselid, 1995).

CCT can also teach hospitality and travel workers to develop more accurate cross-cultural perceptions and to make better adjustments using the norms of the customer's culture. CCT can increase employee job performance, reduce the number of poor judgments an employee makes regarding the customer's behavior, reduce stereotypic thinking and biases, and develop cross-cultural competencies that lead to greater success for service workers and their companies (Ferraro, 2006).

Many models serve as a basis for cross-cultural training programs; one of the most useful for hospitality and travel firms is one that distinguishes between objective and subjective characteristics of culture (Shay and Tracey, 1997). Whereas objective training programs help service workers understand the visible, tangible aspects of culture, subjective programs help workers develop an appreciation for the values and beliefs that influence the behaviors of customers and guests from different cultures.

A critical incident is an event that can be described in a short vignette that deviates significantly, either positively or negatively, from what the customer expects in the service encounter (Bejou, Edvardsson, and Rakowski). The subjective approach to cultural training often includes these critical incidents and explores cultural values that deal with themes such as individualism, collectivism, hierarchy, punctuality, and time and space. Although cross-cultural training programs should include both the objective and subjective considerations of culture, the subjective skills best focus on the values and beliefs of culture, the prime causes of most cross-cultural conflicts. An experiential method such as critical incidents facilitates the learning of these subjective skills. The exercises provided by critical incident training (CIT) offer examples of brief intercultural interactions during which a person of one culture must adapt his or her service skills to meet the needs of the visitor. Critical incidents are an excellent training tool for learning the necessary behavioral skills that allow service workers to accommodate customers from other cultures.

Studies show that intercultural competence does not significantly increase just by associating with people from other cultures. However, specific training that addresses both the intellectual and experiential aspects of cultural differences is required (Sizoo, Plank, Iskat, and Serrie, 2005). Critical incidents provide this training in a practical and easy to understand way that can significantly improve intercultural competence.

## RECENT STUDIES IN CRITICAL INCIDENT TRAINING

A recent study in CIT suggests that specific or industry-targeted cross-cultural incidents are most effective in developing the general skills of those being trained (Cushner and Brislin, 1996). The goal of this research is to develop training methods for hospitality and travel workers that use a variety of critical incidents targeted specifically at the employees of these organizations. Previous research has shown that general skills in cross-

cultural sensitivity are best developed through work with industry-specific content (Glaser, 1984). This study focuses on just that—examining incidents that most affect customer retention in the hospitality and travel industry.

CIT is often used for many different reasons. First, it has been successfully applied in many studies on various industries (Bitner, Booms, and Mohr, 1994; Chung and Hoffman, 1998). Second, the critical incident is a simple approach that encourages a thorough discussion of a prominent issue rather than a meaningless analysis, which is often the situation with other training methods. Third, CIT can reveal complex issues in small vignettes and can provide trainees with a better understanding of the delicate issues of intercultural interaction. Fourth, the method allows service workers in hospitality and travel to reflect on situations that they may soon face from unhappy guests or culturally insensitive associates. Fifth, critical incidents can provide trainees with a chance to use their analytical and communication skills. Lastly, CIT can encourage workers to develop a better understanding of the differences between objective and subjective considerations of culture (discussed earlier in the paper) and can allow employees to concentrate on the latter where most service conflicts occur.

Although the industry-specific incidents described in this paper are each unique learning lessons, the incidents are especially effective in building intercultural competence. This paper next describes the methodology used in the development of the critical incidents, their validation, and their implications on future research.

### III. METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING CRITICAL INCIDENTS

With the help of students and colleagues from a small liberal arts college in Florida, 100 interviews were conducted over 18 months with employees and patrons of hospitality and travel companies. The methodology was simple: interviewees were asked to discuss an unpleasant event that they had experienced either as an employee or as a customer of a hospitality or travel organization. Then, each participant was asked to describe how the organization responded to the situation. Each interviewer was asked to collect at least one incident from many types of businesses (i.e., hotels, airlines, restaurants, etc.) in the industries. It was also requested that interviewees should represent a variety of demographic groups and cultures. The interviewers were given certain parameters when conducting the survey (see Exhibit I).

#### EXHIBIT I: SURVEY INSTRUMENT FOR CUSTOMERS AND WORKERS INTERVIEWED

Recall a recent situation in a hotel, restaurant, or while traveling when you had a particularly unpleasant experience as a result of something a customer or employee said or did. Ask the following questions:

1. What is the situation surrounding the incident?
2. What specific circumstances or behaviors led up to this situation?
3. What did the employee or customer say, and how did the other party behave?
4. What behaviors or comments resulted that made you feel that your situation was caused by a cross-cultural misunderstanding?

#### IV. VALIDATING THE CRITICAL INCIDENTS

To analyze the data, I asked several experienced international business educators, researchers, and hospitality and travel managers to examine each incident and give their opinions as to the correct alternative explanation or explanations. In cases where it became a burden or an impossibility to identify a correct explanation, the incidents were discarded as being too ambiguous for training purposes. Therefore, all incidents that were kept were considered to be clear, with a specific and easily identifiable explanation.

The standard used when selecting members of the validation sample was that each person should have previously experienced a foreign immersion for a minimum of six months' time. All members of the sample were well versed in both objective and subjective issues of culture and were capable of making judgments about the critical incidents. The validation sample comprised eight people who were all considered successful in the global context as educators, researchers, or business managers.

Later, students enrolled in a Cultural Environments class at a small, liberal arts college in Florida were asked to choose the correct explanation(s) (correctness being defined as the clear choice in the context of the culture of the customer of the hospitality or travel organization). This type of sample selection is in line with this paper's assumptions about the creation of culture-specific incidents. If the incidents are to be learning exercises of failed service encounters with customers from varied cultures, then the incidents should be validated by a variety of people using the same framework.

#### V. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Over 100 interviews were completed, representing service workers and customers from various businesses, including hotels, restaurants, airlines, car rental agencies, tourist attractions, and amusement parks. From these interviews, the validation team selected 75 critical incidents that presented clear alternative explanations for why the cross-cultural conflicts or misunderstandings occurred.

#### VI. DISCUSSION

The cross-cultural interactions that are represented in the 75 critical incidents are representative of typical encounters faced by both customers and front-line workers in hospitality and travel. The critical incidents suggest that many of the conflicts relate to both specific cultures and businesses described in the analysis of the preceding findings. These incidents summarize common emotional feelings and communications problems and provide opportunities for trainees of any educational level to expand their current knowledge and become more culturally sensitive. The goal of this research is to provide hospitality and travel companies with another tool to increase their service performance in an ever-changing global environment.

The critical incidents like the sample, Greetings from the Middle East in Appendix A are all drawn from the actual intercultural interactions of front-line workers or customers of hospitality and travel organizations. Such incidents will enable hospitality and travel alternative themes presented in such incidents. Furthermore, these incidents provide workers

with an exercise that can enhance their decision-making capabilities and improve their chances of making more accurate attributions with respect to their customers' behaviors.

Probably the most difficult task in the process of compiling the 75 incidents was creating a variety of possible alternative explanations of why the incident occurred. This presents an opportunity for trainees to highlight correct attributions for the cause of the behaviors described in the incidents. Furthermore, it provides trainees with the opportunity to evaluate incorrect alternatives, which are often the result of stereotyping and cultural biases.

Several themes are uncovered in the explanations of the alternatives, which provide a framework for better understanding the cross-cultural interactions. Cushner and Brislin (1996) categorize cross-cultural failures into eighteen categories based on an analysis of the content of the situation (see Exhibit II).

**EXHIBIT II: EIGHTEEN THEMES THAT SERVE AS BASES OF CROSS-CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS**

1. Anxiety	10. Importance of group vs. individual
2. Emotional experiences and disconfirmed expectations	11. Rituals and superstitions
3. Belonging	12. Hierarchies among people; class and status
4. Ambiguity	13. Values
5. Prejudice and ethnocentrism	14. Learning styles
6. Work	15. Categorization
7. Time and space	16. Differentiation
8. Language and communication	17. In-group/out-group distinction
9. Roles	18. Attribution

Although these themes lead to certain generalizations on why cross-cultural misunderstandings occur, research has shown that finding generalities in the field of training may be a positive step in understanding intercultural behaviors (Zedeck and Cascio, 1984). These themes also enable trainees to focus on general issues that workers can use as examples, regardless of their type of hospitality or travel business, and no matter what cultures are brought together in the interactions. The validation team selected the same “correct alternative” theme or themes on over 80 percent of the incidents reviewed, providing evidence for the stability of these themes.

**VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This exploratory study has focused on two combined industries—hospitality and travel—and the need for successful service encounters. By developing industry-targeted critical incidents for front-line workers and not just middle and senior-level managers, this work will provide this industry with an effective training tool that engages hospitality and travel workers in more meaningful and productive encounters with customers. As with any single-study investigation, it would be desirable to extend this research. To empirically test the effectiveness of these critical incidents, a pre-test, post-test research design with a treatment group and control group is suggested. To test the workers, the widely accepted Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI) would be used. This theory-based instrument could

be very useful in administering both pre-test and post-test designs. Participants in the treatment group could be a convenient sample of hospitality workers from a local resort. They would be tested for intercultural sensitivity both before and after having taken a short training program that would include many of the 75 incidents that were developed. Participants in the control group could be a group of American students taking an international management course.

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## APPENDIX A: Sample Critical Incident

### 02 Greetings from the Middle East

John Smith enjoyed his executive position at a golf resort that caters to business and pleasure travelers from all over the world. John had been working at the resort for about six months when he met Mohammed Nassar, a businessman from Saudi Arabia on the golf course. Mohammed struck up a conversation and found that they had much in common and they decided to have lunch together after their round of golf.

A meeting time was set for 1:30 that afternoon in the hotel café. John arrived at 1:15 so that he could get a desirable table overlooking the course. At 1:30, John looked at his watch, and Mohammed was nowhere in sight. Finally at 1:45 Mohammed arrived looking calm as if nothing was wrong. John appeared upset by his late arrival but continued to smile. As Mohammed approached the table, John stood up to greet him extending his hand toward Mohammed. Ignoring John's hand, Mohammed edged forward and kissed John on the cheek. John was very surprised by this and didn't know what to think. Mohammed began to talk about their round of morning golf but found John bewildered by what had just occurred.

Why is John being distant?

1. John was distant because he could not understand what Mohammed was saying.
2. John was upset that Mohammed was late to the lunch meeting.
3. John became uncomfortable after Mohammed kissed him on the cheek.
4. John had other things on his mind and should not have made the lunch date.

Incident 02: Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

1. There is no evidence given that John did not understand what Mohammed was saying.
2. This is plausible, but not the correct answer. John seemed upset, but he did not let it bother him. In Saudi Arabia there is a 15-minute window on what is considered late. To Mohammed 15 minutes late is like being on time.
3. This is the best choice. In Saudi Arabia, it is normal for two men to greet each other with a kiss on each other's cheek. John did not know this, was uncomfortable with the situation, and thought Mohammed was making a sexual pass at him.
4. Although John may have had other things on his mind, this is not the issue causing John to be distant.