

Recognizing and Preparing the Narcissist for the Expatriate Experience: Practical Notes on Affecting Intercultural Communication Competence

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Abstract

Decades of research have revealed a robust field of knowledge regarding the role of interpersonal communication in the development of strong intercultural communication competence. Successfully moving and thriving among both co- and host cultures require proficient intercultural communication competence and oftentimes well-rounded expatriate preparation education and training. Narcissism is one of the most negative personality traits that can create issues during expatriate attempts to acculturate. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding this trait and how to effectively approach and prepare the narcissist for host-culture experiences. This paper, therefore, addresses narcissism, its effect on intercultural communication competence, and provides insight from nearly a decade of research-based expatriate training regarding the effective preparation of the narcissist toward a successful experience abroad.

Keywords: workplace bullying, discrimination, organization culture, fire station culture, fire station discrimination

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication can be defined as a form of communication that shares information across different cultures and social groups. Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is important when communicating across cultures. ICC is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective..." (Deardoff, 2006) There are many ways that conflict can arise if the communication is misinterpreted. These conflicts include cross-cultural negotiation, small group decision making, and intercultural views of conflict, but this paper will narrow the focus onto one violation that can negatively influence ICC: narcissism. More specifically, this paper will briefly define narcissism and ICC as well as provide advice for coaching the narcissist toward a successful expatriate experience.

1.1 Narcissism

The word narcissism, as discussed in the field of psychology, means self-love. When narcissism is used within the realm of communication, it refers to someone's "tendency to be self-absorbed in conversation" (Littlejohn et al, 2005). When focusing on one's self, we lose the ability to gain knowledge and cross-cultural experiences. Thus, this behavior is done in an attempt to make oneself seem in some way better or more significant than the other person in the conversation. In effect, this behavior places the center of attention and audience-awe on the conversational narcissist.

When conversing with a narcissist, the conversation will be based on their needs, wants, or thoughts. They will use first- person pronouns such as “Me”, “I”, and “Mine” to make their selves the topic of the interaction. According to the largely accepted transactional communication model, in communication, there are at least two people (sender and receiver) who send messages across a channel and provide feedback for one another (Dunne & Ng, 1994). However, a narcissist is continuously sending messages while not noticing or acknowledging the receiver’s feedback. This lack of effective communication is based on the narcissist’s assumption to be the only relevant communicator in a conversation. One of the most apparent characteristics of a conversational narcissist is glazing over or showing no expression while others speak (Leit, 2008). The conversational narcissist will even go so far as to use terminology that is unfamiliar to the listener without providing an explanation or clarification in an effort to make the other party feel inadequate or beneath the speaker.

As leaders, narcissists only search for the answers to questions they are seeking, they do not learn easily from others, and they like to talk over other members in a group. In a group, narcissists initiate sentences with “I think” or “I believe” to prove that their idea is the only one that is relevant and expect every group member to go along with their ideas and plans. The less the attention and power is on them the harder they compete to overpower others. When working in a culturally diverse group, narcissists typically deny others the opportunity to share or promote their cultures. Narcissists perceive these out-group members (Tajfel, 1970) to be the weaker target because they are different, failing to realize their emotions and feelings. According to Grove, “Only the paranoid survive,” in this narcissistic game of taking down the competition that’s not even there.

1.2 Intercultural Communication Competence

By using situation-specific communication, we are able to effectively communicate across cultural groups. Thus, the valued goals or rewards that are expected in these relationships are accomplished. “When communicators interact, they are co-orienting and coordinating their behaviors (verbal and nonverbal) to accomplish social functions, obtain personal goals, and conform to the normative expectations of the situation.”(Wiseman, 2001 p.1) Among many factors, ICC is based partly on the experience a person has communicating within various cultures. Koester and Lustig (2015) view ICC as an evaluative process rather a performance skill, stating “competent intercultural communication is not something one does but rather something that one is perceived to be” (p. 20). Prior to communicating with a different culture, it is one’s duty to understand the communication barriers that can exist in cross-cultural relationships. Such cultural barriers can include one’s beliefs, motives, and customs - to name a few.

ICC can be clustered into three major components: knowledge, motivation, and skills (Dodd, 1998). Knowledge is a key component in gathering the information necessary to communicate effectively. When experiencing different cultures, one way to gain knowledge is to observe and participate. By physically and mentally participating in a culture there is a reduction of culture barriers and an increase in cultural comprehension. The second component, motivation, consists of positives affects toward the other culture. This component allows one culture to experience empathy for another. Competent communicators must reduce negative influences that restrain them from being able to communicate with different members of various cultures. The last component, skills, occurs when the behavior necessary to interact is performed appropriately and effectively. These three components are significant when working with different cultures, because they provide one with the ability to work successfully within and across various cultures. Also, they complement the values one holds when belonging to multiple social groups.

Many social scientists and intercultural communication scholars have provided a robust understanding of ICC. These theories carry a wide range of conclusions varying from identity negation and management to acculturation and adjustment. For example, the Kramer’s (2003) Dimensional Accrual and Dissociation Theory emphasizes how various cultures communicate and provides communication styles that assist in the understanding of intercultural differences that influence intercultural relations. In addition, study abroad programs, ICC assessments, and expatriate training programs can increase one’s ICC, offering one the opportunity to learn and build on one’s cultural and community norms. Our ICC relies on expatriate adaptive skills as well as understanding each unique difference within an out-group.

ICC is not only based on experience learned from another culture, but also what can be learned and applied into one’s life. For example, university global awareness programs are designed to help students move toward a globally minded worldview. Such program expands critical thinking skills as well as academic concepts so that students understand whole world success. Graduates working in multicultural teams will use ICC to enhance the team’s ability to perform tasks through increased engagement.

1.3 Narcissism and ICC

One formidable barrier to ICC is narcissism. Narcissists only focus on self, passing on the opportunity to know others. In ICC, if narcissists are only aware of self, they deny the chance to gain knowledge about other cultures. One focus of ICC is to serve others, demonstrating that others are valued, which communicates respect. As a narcissist, the idea of focusing on others is not relevant. Focusing internally minimizes the expatriate's ability to successfully acculturate through self-monitoring. "Self-monitoring refers to the tendency to be both motivated and capable of regulating our behavior to meet the demands of social situations" (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000 p. 531). Instead of self-monitoring in order to make the many self-improvement skills necessary to develop strong ICC, narcissists simply focus on self in a competitive, self-exalting manner. Other traits that allow redirection are openness, curiosity, and suspending judgment. (Fantini p.1)

1.4 Preparing the Narcissist for an Expatriate Experience

There are two types of narcissists: vulnerable and grandiose. Vulnerable narcissists seem bold on the outside, but are hurting on the inside. They are more emotionally sensitive and tend to play victim when they are not treated with respect. This type of narcissism can be the result of abuse or neglect. The second narcissist type, grandiose, is characterized by hidden emotions and increased confidence. The act of disrespect causes this type of person to exhibit rage and sometimes revenge. This person's parents and elders most likely treated them as superior to his or her peers (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). This distinction between the two types can better prepare expatriate coaches in training such people for abroad experiences.

When coaching a narcissist for an expatriate experience, it is necessary to maintain a positive outlook. Narcissistic actions are often the result of negative self-esteem and past experiences, so assertive and effective communication is necessary. In mild situations, show sympathy by not over reacting. When they are calling for attention just respond positively, verbally or non-verbally, with a smile or bringing humor to a negative situation. Working with a narcissist can be upsetting, so an occasional break may be necessary. During this break, remember what you have learned about what causes this person's behavior and reinitiate the coaching with a clear plan. This plan's end goal should be one of helping him or her become self-monitoring, while minimizing self-admiration. Such a simple initiative can help a narcissist become a competent communicator across cultures.

According to Kets de Vries (2014), successful coaching of the narcissist requires a keen knowledge of how they relate to others, through transference and competitiveness. When coaching a narcissist, their aspirations to be successful and accomplished can be used to drive them toward the goal of successful acculturation. It is also an appropriate initiative to mentally prepare this narcissist for a mind-set of service to others over self, providing some real-life scenarios for the candidate to think and work through. However, when preparing a narcissist for an expatriate experience, it is imperative that a coach partner with the skilled and invaluable service of a licensed and professional counselor.

2.0 Conclusion

The keys to ICC are knowledge, skills, and motivation. The pursuit of strong ICC is in direct opposition to the narcissist's natural tendency. ICC requires the expatriate to be others-focused – a theoretical and practical challenge for narcissists. A global citizen understands that the world shares a future with many different cultures, but cultural differences can be difficult to manage for narcissists or highly ethnocentric cultures (Samovar et al., 2013). For example, the U.S. is characterized by extreme negative ethnocentrism, which is made evident in the recent media scare regarding Muslim Syrian war refugees (Uehling, 2015).

Narcissism hinders one's ability to view others with an open mind and put the concern or needs of others first. While searching self-promotion first, the narcissist is blind to the need for self-monitoring in order to provide for the communication need of others. Cross-culture interactions only compound this challenge. However, effective and purposeful ICC coaching can prepare the narcissist for a successful expatriate experience.

3.0 References

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