STRATEGIC INFORMATION PROVISION
AND EXPERIENTIAL VARIETY AS TOOLS
FOR DEVELOPING ADAPTIVE
LEADERSHIP SKILLS

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The development of adaptability skills is critical for organizational success and survival, yet traditional training interventions are not sufficient to promote adaptive expertise. In this article, we summarize prior research on two training techniques that develop such expertise: experiential variety and strategic information provision in the form of instructions, performance feedback, and cognitive/behavioral guidance. Prior integrative reviews have described how these strategies can promote adaptability by fostering skills in cognitive frame-switching and flexibility. We extend these arguments in the present article by reviewing prior research that supports the use of experiential variety and strategic information provision as elements of an adaptability training strategy. We examine the use of these elements not only in formal training (which was the prime focus of prior reviews), but also in developmental work experiences and in self-development. Additionally, we include a more specific focus on developing cross-cultural adaptability skills through these training techniques.

Keywords: adaptive leadership, adaptability training, frame-changing skill

Adaptability has become increasingly important to leaders at all organizational levels as the nature of work grows in complexity, change, and ambiguity. Standard training practices have not kept pace, continuing to emphasize growth in “routine expertise” in performing typical tasks (Kimball & Holyoak, 2000; Smith, Ford, & Kozlowski, 1997). Although routine expertise benefits performance on familiar tasks, it is not sufficient to help leaders perform novel or dynamic tasks (Smith et al.,

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To help leaders meet the growing demand for adaptive performance, training and development activities need to foster “adaptive expertise” (Kimball & Holyoak, 2000; Kozlowski et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1997). Adaptive expertise is fundamentally different from routine expertise, as it reflects a deeper understanding of a content domain that enables individuals to change their responses in alignment with unanticipated, unfamiliar, and uncertain environmental information (Kozlowski, 1998). If leadership training and development is to keep pace with organizational demands, new approaches must emphasize skill in adaptation as a critical outcome, and use design strategies that specifically target growth in adaptive expertise.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss two strategies for developing leader adaptability and adaptive expertise, *experiential variety* and *strategic information provision* in the form of instructions, performance feedback, and cognitive/behavioral guidance. Ely, Zaccaro, and Conjar (2009) described how these two strategies as used in formal training settings can promote adaptability by improving flexibility and cognitive frame-switching skills. We extend their work by (a) reviewing prior research that supports the use of these design strategies in training, and (b) examining the impact of these design strategies in other learning settings, including developmental work experiences and self-development activities. Additionally, we focus on how these strategies may lead to cross-cultural adaptability, bringing a broader perspective into how and why experiential variety and strategic information provision drive adaptability (cf. Zaccaro, Wood, & Herman, 2006).

### Adaptability and Frame-Changing Skill

For this paper, we adopt the definition of adaptability proposed by Banks, Bader, Fleming, Zaccaro, and Barber (2001) as a “functional change (cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective) in response to actual or correctly anticipated alterations in environmental contingencies” (p. 4). This definition is similar to many others, as described in related reviews (e.g., Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006; Ely et al., 2009; Mueller-Hanson, Nelson, & Swartout, 2009). We refer the reader to Ely et al. (2009) and Zaccaro, Banks, Kiechel-Koles, Kemp, and Bader (2009) for extended treatments of this definition; however, we wish to draw attention to two key points. First, adaptability reflects a fundamental shift in the types of performance strategies used in response to changing conditions in the environment (Ely et al., 2009; Zaccaro et al., 2009). These shifts in performance strategies are critical. If training and development interventions are expected to lead to adaptive behavior, they must improve an individual’s readiness and flexibility to make these performance strategy shifts effectively.

Second, several definitions of adaptability argue that individuals can anticipate change (rather than merely react to it), and alter their performance strategies, either to shape the nature of changing conditions, or to maximize their position in post-change conditions (Ely et al., 2009; Mueller-Hanson et al., 2009). Zaccaro et al. (2009; see also Burke et al., 2006; Ely et al., 2009) outlined the problem-solving processes that contribute to proactive adaptation. Three of these processes—scanning dynamic environments, diagnosing the meaning of pending or actual changing events, and planning responses to change—focus on how individuals frame the problems posed by changing environments and how they derive solutions through these frames. This cognitive process of framing solutions from different perspectives is central to adaptive expertise; in other words, experts in adaptation “recognize changes in task priorities and the need to modify strategies and actions” (Kozlowski, 1998, p. 119).

Cognitive frame changing, the capacity to switch among various perspectives or frames of reference, is a core skill in adaptive problem solving (Ely et al., 2009; DeYoung, Flanders, & Peterson, 2008). Adaptive experts are better able to recognize the need to alter priorities and strategies through altering or switching the frames of reference they use at different points in adaptive problem solving processes (Ely et al., 2009; Kozlowski, 1998; Zaccaro, 2009). We suggest that such experts may more readily refocus attention on different cues and cue combinations when scanning their environments in order to detect how existing patterns are changing. Changing frames consistently, and reconsidering the appropriateness of current problem-solving strategies, leads to changes in cognitive frames themselves, helping experts better diagnose the meaning of subsequent
changes (Jacobs & Jaques, 1987). By altering the frames they use to solve problems that have changed in fundamental ways, adaptive experts also avoid the problem of “functional fixedness” (Duncker, 1926) on an obsolete strategy.

Concepts closely related to cognitive frame changing have been discussed in a variety of literatures (e.g., “insight”; DeYoung et al., 2008). From an interpersonal viewpoint, perspective taking, a skill that facilitates understanding how another individual sees the world, is important for effective negotiations and interpersonal relationships (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Neale & Bazerman, 1983). From an intercultural viewpoint, cross-cultural code-switching is “the act of purposefully modifying one’s behavior in an interaction in a foreign setting in order to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior” (Molinsky, 2007, p. 624). Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) used the term cultural frame-switching to describe how multicultural individuals interpret environmental stimuli and identify culturally appropriate responses by changing the cultural frames they employ.

In the context of organization science, Zyphur (2009) argued that switching methodological mindsets while conducting research can bring novel insights into the research process. He asserted that such cognitive switching involves considering multiple means of data analysis and research design. Adopting different mindsets is expected to help researchers think about problems in new ways that allow for the reframing of problems contributing to creative insight. Specifically, Zyphur argued that “divergent thinking should occur as a function of switching mindsets, so it follows that as the logics underlying analytical mindsets become more different from one another, thinking can become increasingly divergent, and any questions prompted can become more fundamental in nature” (p. 678).

While frame changing skill is an essential element of adaptive expertise (Ely et al., 2009), the process of “mindset switching” is often unlikely to occur because of its inherent difficulty (Zyphur, 2009). Zyphur (2009) argued that such frame-changing requires individuals to “recognize their enacted mindsets and then consciously evaluate and alter them—no easy task” (p. 685). Not only is frame-changing an activity that requires a high level of conscious effort, but evaluating the appropriateness of a particular frame can be challenging. For instance, in interpersonal interactions, an individual must correctly identify the other person’s perspective in order to actually improve the interaction. Changing to the wrong frame, and taking the wrong perspective, can certainly have an undesired impact on the interaction.

Training and development interventions that are intended to build adaptive expertise should foster frame-changing skills to help individuals perform this difficult task that lies at the heart of adaptive expertise (Ely et al., 2009; Kozlowski et al., 2001). In the next section, we examine experiential variety and strategic information provision as elements of adaptability training that promote the development of frame changing skill.

**Training Design Strategies Fostering Adaptive Expertise**

Ely et al. (2009) reviewed strategies for developing cognitive frame-changing skills, including: experiential variety, self-regulation, adaptive guidance, and error management training. In this paper, we build on their work by reviewing empirical research on the influences of experiential variety and different forms of information provision on adaptive performance. We also examine how these training strategies work not only in formal training interventions, but in developmental work assignments and self-development activities as well.

**Experiential Variety**

Experiential variety involves the use of stimuli or practice scenarios in training that vary in either surface or structural details that in turn require changes to performance strategies (Smith et al., 1997; Kozlowski et al., 2001). Surface variation refers to variability in problem details that typically require trainees to use the same basic solution strategy, but to make minor adjustments in its implementation (Gick & Holyoak, 1987). For example, when training military soldiers on tactics...
in clearing a building of potential enemy fighters, practice exercises can alter different aspects of the building, or number and types of enemy inside, but the fundamental performance strategy remains the same. Similarly, customer service training may entail presenting different types of customers, each with somewhat different problems, but that require the same general customer approach. Surface variation in practice scenarios more likely grows routine expertise, helping individuals to transfer what is learned to similar contexts (Smith et al., 1997).

In contrast, structural variation involves varying the details of a problem domain so much that trainees need to fundamentally change their existing performance strategy (Gick & Holyoak, 1987). While surface variation preserves the same solution principle across different problems, structural variation requires trainees to change the basic principle that governs how they are to solve a particular problem (Smith et al., 1997). In our military training scenario, structural variation would occur if during the exercise, a large crowd appears at the building clearing site, asking the soldiers for humanitarian assistance to an injured child. This change would require trainees to alter their original building-clearing strategy to one that involves crowd control and caregiving. Structural variation may inhibit transfer of what is learned in training to a particular problem domain, but would foster adaptive expertise by helping individuals to understand how different solutions address different types of problems (Ely et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1997; Zaccaro, 2009). For example, in the military training example, when the crowd appears, trainees would need to move from a confrontational and peace-making solution frame to a more collaborative, peace-keeping, and humanitarian solution frame. As trainees experience a series of such structurally distinct problems, they should become more adept at engaging in the inherently difficult task of frame-changing.

Zaccaro and his colleagues conducted a series of studies that examined the influence of structural experiential variety on adaptive performance (see summaries in Zaccaro, 2009; Zaccaro et al., 2009). Kemp, Wood, Cracraft, Horn, and Zaccaro (2004) used a military simulation to vary key problem elements such as terrain, target defenses and locations, and enemy numbers. These variations required significant shifts in how team members achieved mission success. They observed that adaptive performance was marginally better for those teams receiving greater variety during the simulation, when they also received feedback on the kinds of member interactions that were necessary for success. Heinen et al. (2007) found stronger support for the influence of experiential variety in a city planning simulation, in which trainees solved a series of practice problems representing either surface or structural variation. Those trained with structural variety across scenarios were more likely to make adaptive decisions in a subsequent performance trial.

Zaccaro, Nelson, Gulick, and DiRosa (2010) directly tested the link between experiential variety and cognitive frame-changing processes. They used the same city planning simulation and manipulation of experiential variety from Heinen et al. (2007), and also manipulated the provision of information and guidance. Trainees were asked to “think aloud” during training, and to describe how they had thought about problems after completing the performance trial; experimenters coded these responses for cognitive frame-changing processes. They found that adaptive decision making was more likely under conditions of both high experiential variety and strategic information provision. Participants who were trained with both high structural variation in scenarios and detailed information provision were more likely to (a) recognize that a different performance strategy was needed in the performance round than in previous rounds, (b) approach the problem in a different way, and (c) alter their ways of thinking about the problem during the performance trial. Zaccaro, Gulick et al. (2010) used teams rather than individuals and replicated the findings of Zaccaro, Nelson et al. (2010), observing similar effects of experiential variety and strategic information provision on team adaptation.

**Experiential variety in developmental work assignments.** Although these studies focus on the impact of experiential variety in formal training settings in which practice scenarios can be carefully structured, adaptability skills can also be developed through other modes of learning, such as developmental work assignments (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). Developmental assignments are those work activities that provide individuals with novel and different learning experiences (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). Because these experiences challenge existing skill sets of participants and foster growth in different directions (Ohlott, 2004), developmental
assignments are well-suited for developing adaptability skills (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004; Zaccaro et al., 2006).

Banks (2006) examined the effects of developmental assignments on social competencies linked to adaptability in a sample of business managers. She also examined the role of managers’ metacognitive skills (i.e., the ability to think about how and what one is thinking; Flavell, 1979) and cognitive complexity (i.e., the ability to mentally represent many distinct elements and their interrelationships; Streufert & Swezey, 1986) as moderators of these effects. She found that developmental assignments were associated with higher social competencies, but only for managers high in the aforementioned individual difference dimensions. She also found that social competencies were associated with higher ratings of adaptive performance by managers’ supervisors, but only in organizations in which innovation was perceived as valued by managers. This study provides evidence for the importance of developmental assignments for adaptability skills, albeit with several moderators of their effects.

Horn (2008) took this research further by (a) examining the explicit link between developmental assignments and frame-changing processes, and (b) exploring the role of experiential variety in such assignments. He measured several characteristics of developmental assignments completed by a sample of business managers, including the absolute number of such assignments, their degree of novelty to the managers, and qualitative differences among different assignments. The last measure reflected the degree of experiential variety among developmental work assignments. Managers also provided assessments of the degree to which different assignments fostered their cognitive frame-changing processes, specifically in regards to how each assignment forced them to abandon existing ways of thinking, explore new frames of reference, and integrate multiple cognitive perspectives. Horn found that developmental assignments involving higher experiential variety and novelty were more likely to be positively associated with frame-changing skills. He also found that experiential variety positively correlated with growth in self-reported adaptive problem solving skills.

**Experiential variety in self-development activities.** Langkamer (2008) extended the principle of experiential variety to a third mode of learning—self development. This form of leadership development was defined by Boyce, Zaccaro, and Wisecarver (2010, p. 162) as “a process in which leaders take personal responsibility for initiating, sustaining, and evaluating growth in their own leadership capacities and in their conceptual frames about the conduct of leadership.” Thus, if the learning focus is on adaptability, then self-developers would need to insert experiential variety into their self-learning curriculum. Langkamer (2008) tested this assertion by asking managers in a multilevel marketing organization to describe their self-developmental experiences and to complete a series of adaptive problem solving exercises requiring demonstration of frame-changing skills. Examples of self-development experiences can include attending self-selected workshops, reading books or watching videos about targeted skills, and developing one’s own practice exercises. The self-development descriptions provided by these managers were coded for the amount of experiential variety each reflected; responses to the business scenario were rated for their degree of displayed adaptability. Langkamer found that experiential variety in self-development exercises was associated with higher scores on the adaptive decision-making measure.

This body of research demonstrates the validity of experiential variety as a key component of adaptability training and development programs. However, Zaccaro (2009) argued that such variety needs to be paired with information provision to actualize its instructional potential. Several of the studies reviewed above found that experiential variety was potent only under conditions of provided guidance or feedback (e.g., Zaccaro & Banks, 2004; Zaccaro, Gulick, et al., 2010; Zaccaro, Nelson, et al., 2010), and other studies have highlighted the importance of information provision in adaptability training (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). We now review this research, highlighting specific prescriptions for growing adaptive expertise.

**Strategic Information Provision**

Several studies have focused on the kinds of instructions and guidance that maximize the gains that can accrue from adaptability training interventions (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, 2008, 2010; Kozlowski et al., 2001). We term this process as strategic information provision because it refers to
learning and performance guidance applied at specific and timely moments in the learning process to maximize gains. We group strategic information provision approaches into two categories: (1) instructions and guidance provided prior to practice and performance trials in training, and (2) feedback and guidance provided during and after training trials.

**Pre-performance instructions.** Pre-performance instructions serve three functions. First, they can help activate the kinds of strategic mental models that facilitate adaptive performance (Smith et al., 1997). For example, Marks, Zaccaro, and Mathieu (2000) observed that when simulated leaders gave teams pre-mission briefs about how to respond to significant risks and opportunities that would occur in a military simulation, teams displayed more accuracy and similarity in their shared mental models, which in turn, improved team adaptive performance. Burke (1999) extended this research by including in the pre-mission briefings a rationale for why certain cue-action contingency linkages were necessary—such information was designed to help team members understand relationships within their shared strategic mental models, thereby fostering their collective adaptive expertise. She found that such enhanced instruction improved the quality of team mental models and team performance. Indeed, only those teams that received cue-action contingency information were able to adapt successfully to a novel operating environment.

The second function of pre-trial instructions is to prime certain ways of thinking about upcoming complex problems (Ely et al., 2009). Such priming can be used to prompt critical thinking and self-regulation processes. In the present review, we focus on two forms of pre-trial instructions, adaptive guidance (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002) and frame-change advisement (Zaccaro, Conjar, Midberry, Ely, & Bryson, 2010). Adaptive guidance entails (a) providing instructions to trainees on how they should approach task performance, and (b) adapting feedback and instruction based on the performance of trainees during practice trials (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Frame-change advisement involves providing instruction to trainees on the use of adaptive problem solving processes, emphasizing the need to consider alternative frames of reference, and providing prompts to trainees during practice trials to engage in frame changing (Ely et al., 2009; Zaccaro, 2009; Zaccaro, Conjar, et al., 2010). Several empirical studies have demonstrated the efficacy of such instruction on adaptive performance, including some that have combined this type of instruction with experiential variety. However, because adaptive guidance and frame-change advisement combine both pre-practice instruction with mid- and post-practice feedback, we will review those studies in more detail in the section below on feedback.

A third function of pre-trial instructions is to help trainees manage their motivation and emotions during the learning process. Error management training has been touted as an effective approach to growing adaptability skills (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008; Ely et al., 2009). However, to maximize the effectiveness of such training, trainees need to be instructed not to be concerned about making errors and that such errors can help learning to occur (Dormann & Frese, 1994; Frese et al., 1991). To examine the use of such pre-performance instruction, Keith and Frese (2005) manipulated whether participants were (a) encouraged to make errors and instructed on the benefits of learning from errors, or (b) told to avoid errors. They observed that trainees encouraged to make errors exhibited better transfer of what was learned in training to a new and different task during a performance trial (i.e., exhibited adaptive transfer; Smith et al., 1997). However, on tasks requiring routine solutions, trainees receiving error management instructions performed at similar levels of performance, attesting to the specific influence of error management instructions on adaptability.

Bell and Kozlowski (2008) manipulated both error framing and emotion control strategies in pre-task instructions given to trainees. The error framing instructions were similar to those used by Keith and Frese (2005). Their emotion control manipulation entailed a discussion of the negative effects of anxiety on performance and instruction in a self-dialogue strategy designed to promote positive reactions and feelings of self control. Bell and Kozlowski found that error framing increased trainees’ focus on mastering new material for those individuals who did not have a generalized mastery orientation. State mastery orientation in turn promoted metacognitive activity and intrinsic task motivation, leading ultimately to improvements in adaptive transfer. Emotion control instructions reduced anxiety, which in turn boosted self-efficacy and, in turn, adaptive transfer. Thus, Bell
and Kozlowski demonstrated that adaptability training ought to include instructions that specifically help trainees frame errors as opportunities to learn and how to manage the anxiety that can emerge from making errors.

A clear implication of these two studies is that error management training is most beneficial if error-framing instructions are administered early in the training cycle. Ely (2009) found support for this prescription in a study in which she contrasted error framing provided either early or later in training. She also varied whether trainees received early or later in training, self-regulation instructions requiring them to evaluate the effectiveness of their current strategies and to consider if alternative strategies may be useful to consider. She found that adaptive transfer was more likely to occur when error management instruction occurred early in training, and strategy regulation instruction occurred later in training. We now discuss the importance of information and guidance at later points in training.

**Within and post-performance feedback and guidance.** The provision of performance feedback is a critical component of most successful training programs (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Zaccaro et al. (2009) argued that specific types of training feedback also facilitate post-training adaptive performance. Research suggests that information provision during and after training performance trials contributes to the development of adaptive expertise in two ways. First, feedback on why certain completed actions were correct or incorrect relative to problem events helps trainees understand how strategies differ across different contexts (see Zaccaro et al., 2009). Along this line, Kiechel et al. (2000) had teams complete a military simulation training exercise and provided either feedback containing only outcome information or feedback that also included information about the behaviors displayed during the performance trial. They found that teams receiving team-level behavior and outcome feedback displayed higher levels of adaptive performance than teams receiving outcome feedback only or no feedback.

Along with this approach to performance feedback, a second way strategic information provision fosters development of adaptability skills is through the technique of adaptive guidance (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002), mentioned earlier in this article. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) described adaptive guidance as specific instruction on how to improve ways of thinking about a problem during and after performance periods. In an experimental study, they provided suggestions to trainees on specific areas they could address to improve their future performance. This guidance was adaptive in that it was individualized for the trainee based upon his or her previous performance. Bell and Kozlowski found that trainees receiving this guidance displayed significant gains in performance during an adaptation trial.

Other studies have examined the adaptive performance implications of providing frame-change advisement during training practice trials. Zaccaro, Conjar et al. (2010) manipulated the provision of (a) adaptive thinking instructions before practice trials, and (b) guidance and prompts to trainees during practice to alter their frames of reference. They observed that soldiers who received such information both before and during practice trials of a military training exercise performed better on subsequent adaptive decision trials than those who did not receive the information; they also found that this information did not help with routine decisions, affirming its explicit utility for fostering adaptation.

Two studies described earlier in this article paired frame-changing guidance with experiential variety to trainees either working individually (Zaccaro, Nelson, et al., 2010) or in teams (Zaccaro, Gulick, et al., 2010). To review, both studies used a city planning simulation as a training platform in which participants confronted either three similar city problems (surface variability), or three very different problems (structural variability). In the information provision condition, participants also received adaptive thinking instructions prior to performance, and frame-change prompts throughout the practice trials. The results of both studies indicated that those trainees or trainee teams that received both experiential variety and frame-change guidance made adaptive decisions during the final performance trial. Trainees receiving only one of these interventions did not perform significantly differently than those who received neither experiential variety nor frame-change guidance.
Applications: Developing Adaptive Leaders in Organizations

In sum, what does the research we have reviewed here suggest about how organizations and consultants can develop adaptive leaders? We argue that this research attests to the value of using experiential variety and strategic information provision to grow adaptability skills. Training interventions implemented with the intent of growing adaptive expertise need to incorporate design strategies that grow skills needed for leader adaptability such as frame-changing skill. Here, we have synthesized research findings that suggest that experiential variety and strategic information provision, particularly in the form of frame-changing guidance, are two key design strategies that contribute to frame-changing skill. We believe that by incorporating these design principles, organizations can better develop the frame-changing skill and thus adaptive expertise of organizational leaders. We now turn to specific recommendations for incorporating experiential variety and strategic information provision into training and development interventions for developing adaptive expertise. Table 1 outlines several basic prescriptions extrapolated from the research reviewed above. In discussing these recommendations below, we also explore how these techniques can extend to the development of cross-cultural adaptability. While few empirical studies have tested this approach directly, we draw on related research to provide insight on why and how such tools would help develop cross-cultural adaptability skills.

The research we have cited indicates that interventions focused on developing adaptability should include variety in the practice scenarios or other stimuli that are presented in training or developmental experiences. Classroom training using case studies or similar designs can incorporate variety by presenting scenarios for which solution strategies used in earlier scenarios no longer apply. Developmental work assignments and self-development activities should be planned with the intent of providing a similar level of variety among work experiences or learning activities. The primary goal of providing such variety is to create a situation where previous cognitive frames are no longer appropriate, requiring trainees to engage in frame-changing processes and to actively consider alternative ways of thinking about a problem. Such activities should lead trainees to develop new and more complex cognitive frames, enhancing their adaptive expertise, and improving their ability to apply existing skills to new and unfamiliar situations.

In addition to incorporating experiential variety, organizations should look to provide some form of frame-change guidance to trainees. As noted by Zyphur (2009), engaging in metacognitive activities such as frame-changing is difficult and unlikely to happen by chance. Zaccaro and colleagues demonstrated empirically that the full benefit of practice variety was only realized when paired with this type of frame-changing guidance (Zaccaro, Gulick, et al., 2010; Zaccaro, Nelson, et al., 2010). Such guidance should be tailored to help trainees recognize the need for frame-changing and understand when it is most important. Moreover, this guidance should provide them with information on the types of frames to consider developing and using. This adaptive guidance can be given explicitly, in didactic style in the classroom, for instance, or just-in-time, from assigned mentors or executive coaches. For instance, when discussing a challenge facing an individual leader, a coach can explicitly push the leader to consider other perspectives, and the solution strategy each perspective implies.

Developing Cross-Cultural Adaptability Skills

Various labels have been used to describe relevant facets of the frame changing process in intercultural research, including code switching, frame switching, and perspective taking (Galinsky, 2002; Hong et al., 2000; Molinsky, 2007; Rentsch, Gunderson, Goodwin, & Abbe, 2007). Taken together, these streams of research suggest that experiential variety and frame-changing guidance can be valuable in developing cross-culturally adaptive leaders. Global and expatriate leaders often fail to perform at expected levels because of their inability to change their leadership approach to fit different cultural contexts (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). In essence, they apply leadership mental
models, or frames of reference, that work in their own culture, to interactions with different cultures (Black & Gregersen, 2000). To develop cross-cultural leadership skills, these leaders would need (a) learning experiences that help them discover new, culturally variant leadership frames, and (b) guidance on the appropriate application of these frames.

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples for incorporating training strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experiential variety</td>
<td>Incorporating variety into practice scenarios or other training stimuli that requires trainees to change their existing performance strategy in a fundamental way such that an entirely new strategy is considered.</td>
<td>Change practice scenarios in training such that each new one requires a fundamentally different solution strategy.</td>
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<td>Present case studies that offer entirely different problems; each case would require a unique solution strategy and new understanding of key variables to generate that solution.</td>
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<td>Provide cross-cultural interactions that activate different cultural dimensions; have learner experience fundamentally different cultures, requiring unique interaction strategies.</td>
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<td>Provide a range of developmental work assignments that differ fundamentally in the kinds of problems and work issues being addressed.</td>
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<td>Include in a self-learning curriculum a range of activities that differ in the types of problems addressed, and in the ways of thinking about those problems.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic information provision and frame-changing guidance</td>
<td>Providing information in the form of feedback and guidance before, during, and after events.</td>
<td>Describe the processes involved in monitoring one’s own thinking and behavior.</td>
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<td>Explain in advance how solution strategies may change depending upon different situations that may be encountered.</td>
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<td>Provide feedback that focuses on reconsidering performance and cognitive strategies in different contexts.</td>
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<td>Provide feedback that offers the reasons why specific decisions were correct or incorrect so that lessons learned can be applied to new situations.</td>
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<td>Encourage trainees to identify different ways of thinking about a particular problem.</td>
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<td>Provide advance information and real-time support for different cultural interpretations of situations.</td>
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In developing global leadership, “crossing country and cultural borders is the determining piece” (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 22), facilitating a process which builds people who are “flexible in thought” (p. 35) as well as adaptive in leadership behavior. Intercultural immersion is a type of experiential variety that may be most valuable for cross-cultural adaptability and global leadership (Mendenhall, Kühlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002; Osland, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2006). Living and working in a foreign culture, more than any other type of developmental work assignment, “makes it possible to have mind-altering, head-cracking experiences” (Gregersen, Morrison, & Black, 1998, p. 30) that prepare individuals to lead more effectively across cultures. These paradigm-shifting learning experiences effectively “unfreeze” individuals’ cultural mindsets, and prepare them to more readily engage in discrete frame-breaking episodes in subsequent interpersonal and strategic contexts (Oddou & Mendenhall, 2008; cf. Horn, 2008).

Intercultural experiential variety as part of global leadership development can also lead to cognitive and moral maturation, enabling higher levels of processing of complex, even paradoxical, information (Kohonen, 2004). At higher levels of leadership, cross-cultural experiential variety may benefit strategic decision-making aspects of cross-cultural leadership (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002), because “our cultural mindset influences the fundamentals of a business” (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000, p. 214). Indeed, cross-cultural experiential variety of senior leaders has been linked to firm-level performance (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001). Such variety can also be used to develop adaptability skills in cross-cultural simulations called cultural assimilators (Bhawuk, 2001). Cultural assimilators are scenario-based, feedback-rich exercises that can provide (a) intensive culture-specific information to prepare leaders to adapt to specific cultural contexts, or (b) broad, culture-general theory, to help them focus on cultural dimensions that apply to many cultures (see Abbe, Gulick, & Herman, 2007 for a relevant review). Thus, such exercises can combine experiential variety with strategic information provision to foster cultural adaptability.

These arguments favor the utility of experiential variety and strategic information provision in cultural adaptability training. Accordingly, they fit nicely into the prior research we reviewed on developing more generic adaptability skills. We urge that future research efforts extend the findings found in prior adaptation research within single cultural domains to settings that require multicultural adaptation.

References


