



Cross Cultural Agility Training

Learning to **lead a team** or a company effectively in a **different cultural setting** is very much like endurance training. Maybe not quite like training for a triathlon, there are a few parallels however: It doesn't happen overnight: Like any other muscle or endurance training **it takes time**.

*The basic rule in training to be able to participate in a triathlon you need to **stress the body into adaptation and growth**.* In Cross Cultural Agility endurance this translates into: **stretching** the muscles of your **mind and soul into adaptation and growth**.

Working as an Expat in any given country is a tricky thing. Generally Expat **assignments are limited** to 4 or 5 years, so going in you know more or less when it's going to end. Just think how that can **translate into commitment** from a host country point of view. Also be mindful how you approach the situation. You might keep that in the back of your mind yourself when things don't go your way, as in: Anyway it's only temporary. Or you can **stretch these cultural agility** muscles of yours and **commit to the situation**. Like for a race, you can choose to train to be able to at least participate and **finish at your personal best**.

1) Base Training: *The first few weeks of any endurance training program focuses on muscle and movement prep and **includes limited growth in volume or intensity**.* In other words: **Give yourself time**. Warm up these muscles and **set yourself realistic goals**. Make a plan.

More often than not you were sent on your assignment because **you're very good at what you're doing**. And there lies the trap: you'll **rely on how you've done things so far**. In a different cultural setting you might have to adapt a few things that worked for you before. You might have to tweak your

communication style, how you set expectations, how you generate ideas or make decisions. Be open for **new strategies and design a training plan** that helps you on the way.

First of all you want to take stock and **understand the status quo**: note differences in **decision-making processes**, and **how people relate to hierarchy**. Explore **relationship to time**, are people rather linear, like decisions made quickly (that can be a type question, but is often influenced by culture) or do they prefer exploring all the options, taking time, are not too bothered wrapping it all up? How do you best communicate in the new cultural setting? Are people **formal or informal, direct or indirect**, how do they prefer to **receive and give information**, are they **explicit** or rather **indirect communicating** goals, targets and issues? What is the role of an **individual versus the group**, how does this influence **feedback, decision making and conflict resolution**?

*2) The 'Build Phase' focuses on a series of stresses (volume, intensity and recovery), you'll slowly inch your way up to race distances and have trained your body to **not only recognize the discomfort, but also better manage it.***

Not unlike in physical training your **brain muscles** need to be **stretched beyond your comfort zone**: it needs to hurt a little to have impact. So, be prepared for a bit of discomfort when you try new things and **leave your comfort zone to adapt to your new cultural setting**. Reflect on what behavior and situations resonate with you and explore the reasons behind that. Note what upsets you. What **rings your bell**, what drains your energy, what gives you energy? How do you need to **adapt your leadership and communication style to tie in with the other culture**? What do you need to **communicate about your own leadership and communication style**?

3) Recovery phases allow for extra rest and replenishment, allowing the body to repair and get stronger.

Not unlike in endurance training, you need to **pause and rest** when you adapt to a new cultural setting. **Experiencing a new culture is exciting** for most, you want to immerse and experience it all at once. That can be **overwhelming** and send your system in overload. When that happens do a reset, have a break of all the new exciting experiences and **pull back into your comfort zone**. It helps if you're **aware of your support mechanisms**. In physical training you might need a massage, a hot bath, maybe some ointment. What are these **recovery tools for your mind and soul**? Known food, music, books, and of course people come to mind. Find out **what grounds you**, what helps you recharge your batteries.

*4) In endurance training you need to **work out different muscles and keep surprising your body**, that makes training more effective.*

For cultural immersion, work different muscles that help you **deal with your cultural setting and understanding it**: like **language, arts, communication, food, history, relationship to nature, spiritual etc.** It's a

little bit like throwing spaghetti on the wall to check whether they are cooked al dente: you'll just have to **try different tools at different times and see what sticks**.

Mere cultural awareness is not enough: it's a good start, but in order to **lead effectively and have people follow you and be motivated** you need to be able to **adapt to your cultural setting and modify your behavior**.

5) Nutrition: *beware what you put in your system, be selective, make sure it's healthy, digestible and gives you energy.*

What are your cultural vitamin shake ingredients? Make a **list of all the things that excite you, that drain you, that have you interested in exploring more**.

Know and implement your boundaries. Make a plan how and when to absorb different parts of your new cultural setting when you can. **How can you incorporate them** into your no doubt busy schedule? When you can best fit in language learning sessions. When do you **make time to meet the team**, have some one on one time with stakeholders? What **information can be covered by training or reading**, what could be solved by **coaching or mentoring**? When are your recovery phases, **what are your support mechanisms**? Who is in your support network?

6) Find training buddies to share experience, training plans and nutrition...

We all know that not everything can be planned and **it's usually the things we didn't see coming that cause upheaval**. It's good to have a group of people to share these immersion experiences. It's nice to know you're **not alone struggling with cultural adaptation** and learn from other people how they deal with intercultural interaction issues. It's also a platform to **share your successes and exchange ideas**. A **good support network** will help you **recharge your batteries** and remind you that **cultural agility takes time**.

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