

Case study 0.1: Training in Yemen

During her internship at a European consulting company, Fanny was asked to assist a senior consultant sent to Yemen for a much needed two week “budget and cost control” training session at an important local company.

Fanny’s first surprise was to discover that whatever the interest of the attendees, which they formally expressed, they always took valuable time out of the course for the multiple daily prayers required by their Muslim culture. The second surprise, more difficult to deal with, was that, in spite of the attention that the attendees showed during the course, when it came to practice it was almost as if the course had not taken place. This observation, combined with the frequent breaks, started to dampen Fanny’s and the consultant’s spirit. The time left for the task, which was reducing day by day, increased their stress and they began to lose their grip. Of course, the critical question which arose was: who is wrong? Is it us, the trainers, or the attendees?

Realizing that they were about to tend to reciprocal malevolence (like criticizing the attendees, then each other’s teaching, then suffer the pain of guilt) they decided to do themselves some good and to relax during the next prayer meeting. Then, they had a stress-free conversation about the culture issues they were encountering. They observed the fact, probably related to Muslim culture, that the attendees were all men. They also noted that these were proud people and, despite having little money, considered prayer more important than budget and cost control. Their rank of values was completely different.

In a flash, Fanny understood. In this culture not only prayers but also pride were more important than budget management. Maybe was it simply impossible for these men to disclose what they didn’t know or understand in the presence of a young European woman? Was she then the problem? Or could she choose to be the solution?

She suggested that the consultant continued the teaching alone. Fanny would assist him by actually assisting the audience. She would be the one to ask the questions. The only unknown was how the attendees would welcome such a change of role. They didn’t even seem to notice it... apart from the fact that from then on everything taught was put into practice. The course became a success for both the attendees and the consulting company. And for Fanny it turned out to be a rewarding experience.

Juliette Tournand & Fanny Lincoln
2012

Discussion questions:

- What are the cultural differences preventing the training to take place as expected?
- How does creativity enter in action?
- How do you explain that the participants didn’t seem to notice Fanny’s change of role?
- Can you think of a similar situation near you?

For more information about this case study and the textbook, go to www.crossculturaltextbook.org.