

Diversity: A Challenge of Global Proportions

BRIEF

IBM Management Development teams with Training Management Corporation to address the scale and complexity of multiculturalism with “Shades of Blue”

This brief outlines an approach, based on the extensive experience of IBM with the *Shades of Blue* management development program, to foster learning and awareness of cultural diversity & multiculturalism on a global scope.

The Challenge

The challenges of multiculturalism have significantly changed the way managers at IBM do the things they do. Multiculturalism is defined as the great arc of values, attitudes and behaviors through which groups relate to each other and the world at large. It is the broad spectrum of differences across which we communicate and interact in a global environment.

It requires IBMers to develop and exhibit a high degree of cultural competence (i.e., the skills to appropriately translate and localize intentions and initiatives).

The increasing globalization of the organization has rendered geographic boundaries porous, sometimes even insignificant. Complex global matrix relationships and communication technology have moved borders and boundaries directly into IBM workspaces, mobile phones and onto their Thinkpads. At the same time, the workforces in most countries within which IBM operates are increasingly heterogeneous and diverse.

How does an enterprise build its capability for swift global execution in an organization that is home to over 160 nationalities? How does this enterprise optimize individual and collective performance on the basis of its multiculturalism in a global economy that demands speed of change and execution? How does an individual reach full productive potential working in such a globally diverse environment? How do we transcend the tremendous variation in interpreting key organizational values, such as respect for the individual, recognizing outstanding performance, teamwork and sensitivity to the needs of all employees and the communities in which the company operates?

IBM has addressed these challenges with *Shades of Blue*, a blended training program involving both e-learning and a face-to-face learning lab using IBM-specific case studies and TMC-developed self-awareness tools (the Cultural Orientations Indicator®).

Diversity Goes Global

IBM understands that diversity is a business imperative of equally complex global proportions for the company, its organizational structure and its suppliers and customers alike.

As defined by Ted Childs, vice-president of Workforce Diversity at IBM, issues such as Cultural Awareness/Acceptance, ethnic minorities and multi-lingualism are characteristic key elements comprising IBM's Global Workforce Diversity Challenges.

With *Shades of Blue*, IBM relies on an integrated process that addresses these forces based on their importance as key business imperatives in the global marketplace.

IBM identified several objectives in their needs assessment and design of *Shades*:

- Broaden the definition of diversity to include the variety of ways in which people differ and develop a framework that supports the notion of “global diversity.”
- Recognize that the majority of differences occur “below the surface” of what is observed. Differences involve behaviors, cognition and emotions, each deeply rooted in the orientations each person brings to the business environment.
- Equip managers with the necessary global mindset, skills and competencies for dealing with and managing deep sources of difference and the resulting complexity in the workplace.
- Develop leadership skills that are firmly rooted in effective strategies for global diversity within the organizational culture.

The requirements of *Shades of Blue* to foster awareness, learning and skills development needed to be dynamic, flexible and broad enough to accommodate the spectrum of challenges that exists at IBM on a worldwide basis.

An Innovative Approach

IBM found that TMC's Cultural Orientations Model™ (COM™), a cultural orientations approach with ten dimensions of cultural differences, provided a common language and framework for mapping experiences and gaps that will lead to viable action plans and tangible business results.

The Cultural Orientations Model™ (COM™) transcends the nationality-based models of cultural differences that were fueled by the organization over 30 years ago. This enabled IBM to craft a more differentiated and relevant exploration of cultural differences and orientations.

Training Management Corporation (TMC), a consulting group with in-depth expertise in the cross-cultural field and multiculturalism, developed the COM™.

The neutral, non-judgmental vocabulary for addressing cultural differences in the COM™ enables a discussion of different experiences that is non-judgmental and non-threatening.

The premise of the approach is that in a multinational organization, a country specific discussion of culture is meaningful, albeit too simplistic. When organizations globalize, the entire discussion and skill base of each manager changes and culture is of increasingly strategic importance. After all, performance within the global organization rests significantly on how well leaders are able to...

1. Select, develop, and retain global talent
2. Unify and align this talent through a strong and vibrant organizational culture
3. Allow each individual to preserve his/her cultural identity while maintaining the cultural core of the organization
4. Move beyond acceptance of differences to the ability to leverage them for competitive superiority.

Culture becomes an active skill as cultural competence increasingly results in competitive advantage – and creates an inclusive organization.

To build cultural competence, IBM's *Shades of Blue* program engages the individual in a continuous learning cycle. The process defines five essential learning requirements to enhance cultural competence: open attitude, self-awareness, other-awareness, cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural skills (such as style-switching and cultural due-diligence). These are critical to performing in a multi-cultural marketplace.

IBM firmly believes that cross-cultural competence is the glue that enables cohesiveness and collective performance. Culture is the seedbed for performance. In a high-performance environment of the global marketplace, culture is a strategic skill-set of leaders and managers.

After the first successful year of deployment in 2001, IBM has found this approach gaining momentum through the credibility given by the actual *Shades* deployment team. Every member is an experienced management developer who has made a commitment to living the essence of the *Shades* messages.

The geographically dispersed *Shades* core team is led by Nancy Curl (US), Leighton Grant (France), Erika Kleestorfer (Austria), Nirmala Menon (India), Anita Guha (India), Angela Chang (Taiwan), Peter Samardak (US), Sharon Johnson (US) and Joerg Schmitz (US – TMC).

Together, the team has learned to understand and value each other's differences and to leverage these differences for success. This team has become a powerful example of the positive transformation and synergy possible to help meet challenges faced by each global manager and leader.

Lessons Learned

To date IBM identifies several key 'lessons learned' with *Shades of Blue* that have been essential to success on a global scale:

- Ensure a strong linkage to strategic business imperatives to focus the discussion of culture and multiculturalism in concise, applied business terms.
- Support the initiative with a blended approach to learning, incorporating face-to-face sessions with online resources. This is the four-tier model blended e-Learning approach developed by IBM Management Development.
- Create a global, cross-cultural development and delivery team to effectively deploy the global initiative as well as engrain and model the intended behaviors.
- Create effective relationships with subject matter experts that ensure alignment specific to an organization's needs. The quality of relationships with vendors is key to building sustainable success and continuous improvement of the organizational capability through meaningful learning.

Conclusion

With *Shades of Blue*, IBM has demonstrated the global impact of diversity for its local operations worldwide in a compelling, useful and usable manner.

After the first year of deployment of the *Shades* initiative, participant feedback emphasizes a heightened appreciation of attitudes toward diversity, improvements in customer-client support, enhanced cross

border negotiation results and improved cross border functional communication. *Shades of Blue* has proven to be a highly effective team building experience for global teams.

Clearly for IBM, global diversity, i.e. the skill to effectively leverage differences for competitive advantage, is a living practice that evolves with the business.

As IBM continues implementation of *Shades of Blue*, the power of multiculturalism will emerge as a key to its competitive superiority in the global marketplace.

Authors: Nancy A. Curl, IBM; Joerg Schmitz, Tim Walker, TMC

Shades of Blue Profiles

Among the IBM-TMC professionals that deliver *Shades of Blue* is a mix of leaders and managers from a variety of functions, backgrounds and countries.



Contact Address: Tim Walker, Training Management Corporation, Princeton, New Jersey 08540 USA
Tel: (609) 951-0525 · Fax: (609) 951-0395 · Email: twalker@tmc.com · Web: www.tmc.com