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Cross-Cultural Skills for Deployed Air Force Personnel

Defining Cross-Cultural Performance

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Summary

Air Force leadership recognizes that the cross-cultural performance of Air Force members now plays a greater role in mission success than ever before. AF/A1D therefore asked RAND to assist in developing a comprehensive program for preparing members of the Air Force in cross-cultural skills.

To better understand the behaviors that the Air Force hoped to develop and improve through this program, we reviewed existing literature on cross-cultural job performance and discussed cross-cultural training needs with various Air Force personnel. We found that there is no clearly established description of the behaviors required to perform in a foreign country and that the opinions of Air Force personnel differ about what should be included in the training for such performance. Given these differences of opinion and the fact that no taxonomy covering all relevant aspects of cross-cultural performance had yet been established, RAND was given the goal of creating the taxonomy.

To accomplish this goal, we began with three main questions:

1. What is cross-cultural performance, or behavior?
2. Which cross-cultural behaviors do Air Force members, or airmen, identify as important to their deployed jobs?
3. Do all airmen, regardless of job requirements, need the same type and/or amount of cross-cultural training?

We then developed a framework of 14 cross-cultural behavior categories that could be used to address these three main questions.

Nine of the 14 categories encompass behaviors that are considered *enabling*—i.e., they help facilitate a variety of day-to-day activities and are likely to be needed in a variety of jobs. These categories are foreign language skills; verbal and nonverbal communication; applying appropriate social etiquette; managing stress in an unfamiliar cultural setting; changing behavior to fit cultural context; gathering and interpreting observed information; applying regional knowledge; self-initiated learning; respecting cultural differences. The other five categories encompass behaviors that are considered *goal oriented*—i.e., they are associated with specific mission-related activities and are likely to be needed only by individuals working in certain Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs) or for certain job tasks. These categories are establishing authority; influencing others; negotiating with others; establishing credibility, trust, and respect; resolving conflict.

The importance of the 14 behavior categories for deployed performance was evaluated by surveying approximately 21,000 previously deployed airmen. The survey respondents generally

rated enabling behaviors as more important than goal-oriented behaviors; they also rated skill in the language of the country of deployment as less important than half of the other categories. (See pp. 18–20.) We also examined the importance ratings within each AFSC and the differences across AFSCs. For example, Pilots tended to view the 14 behavior categories as unimportant to their deployed jobs, whereas Special Investigations, International Affairs/Foreign Area Office, and Security Forces personnel tended to have the opposite view. (See pp. 20–23.)

Overall, the results show that at least some airmen view each category of cross-cultural behavior as important (see pp. 18–27), suggesting that the Air Force should include all 14 in a comprehensive training program. Based on the survey findings, we recommend three graduated levels of training in each of the categories. All airmen would receive a low level of training throughout their career and just prior to deployment. Airmen in AFSCs that indicated the 14 categories were, on average, moderately important would also receive medium-level, in-depth training. And airmen in AFSCs that rated certain categories highly important would also receive high-level—specialized, expert-level—training. (See pp. 20–23.)

Other suggestions for next steps in designing a comprehensive cross-cultural training program include evaluating existing Air Force cross-cultural training, designing new curricula to address the 14 behavior categories where necessary, developing assessment tools for measuring skills in the 14 categories, setting standards for cross-cultural performance expectations, and tracking the skills and training received. (See pp. 41–47.)