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## The Role of Culture in the Transfer of Training

Corinne Brion

University of Dayton, cbrion1@udayton.edu

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# **Leading for Culturally Responsive Professional Development**

**Corinne Brion**

University of Dayton, Ohio, USA

Cbrion1@udayton.edu

## **Abstract**

Organizations interested in raising their performance and results spend large sums of money on training their employees, but unless the resultant learning is transferred to the work situation, that investment will not yield a return. This study's initial premise is that national cultures may play a part in the transfer process. The study's purpose is to identify national cultural factors which may influence training and learning transfer. Leadership trainings among school leaders in Ghana and Burkina Faso, West Africa were observed and recorded using Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) Six Cultural Dimensions model as a framework of analysis. Some cultural factors, which may have influenced transfer, are identified and the author provides a practical checklist that training organizers can use to ensure they account for cultural factors before, during, and after training.

**Keywords:** Culture, training, learning transfer, professional development, training transfer

## Introduction

The American Society of Training and Development estimated that the USA alone spent \$125.88 billion on employee learning and development in 2009 (ATD Research, 2010). Yet, only 10% of the money invested in training results in transfer of knowledge, skills, or behaviors in the workplace or at home (Georgenson, 1982). Although the idea that only 10% of the money spent yields changes in practices has been disputed (Ford, Yelon, & Billington, 2011; Saks & Belcourt, 2006), these researchers agree that the money invested in developing trainees' human capital yields low to moderate results at best, indicating that there is a transfer problem. Learning transfer, also referred to as training transfer, is defined as “the effective and continuing application by learners—to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities—of knowledge and skills gained in learning activities” (Broad, 1997, p. 2).

Learning transfer has been studied for decades and there is a very large literature. Table 1 summarizes key findings and Table 2 describes what has become the main measurement tool.

**Table 1**

*Key Enhancers to Learning Transfer According to Burke and Hutchins (2007) and Grossman and Salas (2011)*

Author	Burke and Hutchins, 2007	Grossman and Salas, 2011
	Cognitive ability	Cognitive ability
Trainee	Self-efficacy	Self-efficacy
Characteristics	Motivation (pre-training motivation and motivation to learn)	Motivation
	Perceived utility of training	Perceived utility of training
	Anxiety and negative affectivity*	

	Conscientiousness	
	Openness to experience*	
	Extroversion	
	Career planning*	
	Organizational commitment*	
	Locus of control	
	Behavior modeling*	Behavior modeling
Training	Error management*	Error management
Design	Learning goals*	Realistic training environment
	Needs analysis	
	Content relevance*	
	Practice and feedback*	
	Over-learning	
	Cognitive overload	
	Active learning	
	Self-management strategies	
	Technical support	
	Transfer climate*	Transfer climate
Work	Support (peer and supervisor)*	Support (peer and supervisor)
Environment	Opportunity to perform*	Opportunity to perform
	Accountability	Follow up
	Strategic link	

\*Factors that had a strong or moderate relationship with transfer

## Learning Transfer System Inventory

In 24 countries, Holton III, Bates, and Ruona (2000) created, piloted, and validated a 16-factor Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI) based on 16 constructs (Table 2). The LTSI was designed as a pulse-taking diagnostic tool. As with Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Broad and Newstrom (1992), each of these constructs can hinder or promote learning transfer.

**Table 2**

### *Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI)*

Capability	Motivation	Work Environment
Content validity	Transfer effort: Performance expectations	Supervisor support
Transfer design	Transfer performance: Outcome expectations	Supervisor sanctions
Opportunity to use	Learner readiness	Peer support
Personal capacity	Motivation to transfer	Performance coaching
	Performance, self-efficacy	Personal outcomes: Positive
		Personal outcomes: Negative
		Resistance to change

## National culture and learning transfer

Despite the considerable amount of literature on the factors influencing learning transfer, there are a limited number of research studies that examine the relationship between national cultures and learning transfer (Caffarella, 2002; Closson, 2013; Rahyuda, Syed, & Soltani; 2014; Silver, 2000). These scholars included national culture in the learning transfer process by addressing cultural differences among participants (Closson, 2013), utilizing culturally appropriate materials in the training content or follow up (Caffarella, 2002; Rahyuda et al; 2014;

Silver, 2000), and explaining how the training process is influenced by various cultural factors (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006; Raver & Van Dyne, 2017; Yang, Wang, & Drewy, 2009).

Nations doing business across national and cultural borders has become the norm (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017). This globalization has made it crucial for businesspeople to understand the importance of intercultural interactions because these interactions affect learning and the implementation of knowledge. Raver and Van Dyne (2017) assert that cultural intelligence (CQ) is paramount when working in various cultural contexts because culture affects learning. They define CQ as “the capability to function effectively in intercultural contexts” (Raver & Van Dyne, 2017, p. 407), and suggest that there is a need for additional research on CQ and learning transfer.

Yang et al., (2009) proposed a conceptual framework that aims to explain how various cultural factors influence the training process. The authors asserted that the fundamental reason why culture impacts training is that learning is not only an individual intellectual activity but also a social process that takes place in certain cultural contexts. These authors posited that cultural factors affect training events via the content and methods chosen, the selection of trainers, and the trainee characteristics because each national culture has its learning style. Similarly, the trainers' expertise in the subject, credibility, and training style influence the trainees' motivation and learning efficiency (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002). Although Baldwin and Ford (1988) specifically included learner characteristics as one of three key inputs in the training transfer process, national cultures have rarely been considered as a variable of learning transfer.

Closson (2013), Caffarella (2002), and Rahyuda et al. (2014) are among the few authors affirming a relationship between cultural factors and learning transfer. Caffarella (2002) and Closson (2013) posited that racial and/or cultural differences do not only impact learning (Raver

& Van Dyne, 2017) and the training process (Yang et al., 2009), but that cultural differences also influence learning transfer. Beyond an awareness of who is represented in the room socially and ethnically, Caffarella (2002) suggested that the content of the materials should reflect the cultural differences to enable transfer. The author asserted that learning transfer should be discussed within contexts because context affects the way we teach, what we teach, and how we teach. Moreover, Caffarella (2002) affirmed the necessity for trainers and facilitators to be culturally sensitive and understand the local norms, traditions, and cultures to facilitate the transfer of learning. For example, when working in developing countries, Silver (2000) recommended using culturally relevant music, drama, literature, metaphors, and analogies to help nondominant groups feel valued and reduce potential barriers to learning. According to Caffarella (2002), the planning phase of a training is when facilitators can deliberately include culturally responsive approaches and determine how prominent his or her own cultural identity is in the training.

Finally, in their review of the post training literature, Rahyuda et al. (2014) supported the importance of national contexts in the transfer of training. The authors stated that there is a lack of studies examining the impact of cultures and post-training interventions, particularly in developing countries. They also affirmed the need to conduct empirical studies rather than laboratory and simulation-based studies.

What might practitioners do? Given the limited empirical evidence that national cultures influence transfer, there is always the option to do nothing. However, based on the significant cultural disparities among countries, practitioners should be attentive to the impact of national cultures on enhancing or hindering learning transfer.

On the basis of the literature on culture's role in transfer, some authors argue that there is a need for a comprehensive, multidimensional, and unifying model of learning transfer that

considers culture as a key factor (Brion, in press; Raver & Van Dyne, 2017). On the other hand, the literature might be seen as supporting a rather limited role for culture. For example, in a study of peer and supervisor support and transfer in four Arab countries, Yaghi and Bates (2020) suggested that, at best, cultural factors were not significant.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **The Hofstede et al. (2010) model of national culture**

The theoretical framework of the present study consisted of the Hofstede et al. (2010) model of national culture, which consists of six dimensions (6D) that the investigator utilized to interpret and code the data. The researcher chose this model because it is widely accepted and studied. Additionally, this model seemed appropriate because this study sought to examine the role of national culture on learning transfer.

National culture is about the value differences between groups of nations (Hofstede et al., 2010). The authors conducted a comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by national culture. They analyzed a large database of employee value scores collected within IBM between 1967 and 1973. The data covered more than 70 countries. Hofstede et al. (2010) first used the 40 countries with the largest groups of respondents. Afterwards, they extended the analysis to 50 countries and three regions. Subsequent studies validating the earlier results include commercial airline pilots and students in 23 countries, civil service managers in 14 countries, 'up-market' consumers in 15 countries, and 'elites' in 19 countries. Since 2010, scores on the dimensions are listed for 76 countries partly based on replications and extensions of the IBM study by different scholars on different international populations. The countries' positions on these dimensions are expressed in a score on a 100-point-scale with zero being the lowest possible score. The cultural dimensions in the Hofstede



model represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another that distinguish countries (rather than individuals) from each other. The model consists of the following six dimensions.

### ***Power distance***

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is unequally distributed. The fundamental issue is how a society handles inequalities among people. In societies with a large degree of power distance (PD), people accept hierarchy. In societies with low power distance, people strive to demand justification for inequities in power.

### ***Individualism versus collectivism***

Societies can be divided according to whether they subscribe to individualism or collectivism (IDV). Individualist societies are those in which the propensity is for individuals to only take care of themselves and their immediate family. In collectivistic cultures, people think of the needs of the group over individual needs. In such cultures, the relationships between people are valued and they define their self-image in terms of “we” versus “I.”

### ***Masculinity versus femininity***

In this dimension, masculinity (MAS) represents a preference in society for achievement, competitiveness, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. On the other hand, femininity embodies an inclination for cooperation, modesty, caring, and quality of life.

### ***Uncertainty avoidance index***

This dimension speaks to the degree to which individuals are uncomfortable with uncertainty. Countries exhibiting strong uncertainty avoidance (UA) are not tolerant of

unconventional behaviors and ideas. Societies where UA is weak have a more undisturbed attitude.

### ***Long term orientation versus short term normative orientation***

Long term orientation (LTO) denotes a society that is focused on the future. Short term normative orientation societies focus on the present or past and value traditions.

### ***Indulgence versus restraint***

A society may value indulgence or restraint (IND). Indulgence refers to a society that accepts having fun and enjoying life. Restraint is for a society that eliminates gratification of needs and controls it with strict social norms.

## **Methodology**

### **The context: Ghana and Burkina Faso**

These countries were chosen because they were the countries where the author was working as a training consultant. Through observation, discussions, and the keeping of a diary, the writer assessed how the key cultural variables, as set out in Table 3, influenced training transfer. An important contextual feature was that training was provided by institutions and people from outside the trainees' own countries.

### ***Ghana***

Ghana, which is located along the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean in West Africa, has 26 million inhabitants and holds the 142nd position out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (Country Comparison Ghana, 2019; United Nations Development Programme, 2019). The HDI measures the average capabilities that people have to live long healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, and to have decent standards of living (United Nations

Development Programme, 2019). In Ghana, the language of instruction is English and, as a former colony of Britain, it follows the British educational system.

### ***Burkina Faso***

Also, in Africa, Burkina Faso is to the north of Ghana and has a population of about 19 million inhabitants (Country Comparison Burkina Faso, 2019). Burkina Faso is a former French Colony. The national language is French and the educational system is inspired by the French educational model. Today, Burkina Faso holds position of 182 out of 188 countries on the HDI (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

**Table 3**

### ***Cultural Profiles***

<b>Cultural Dimension</b>	<b>Ghana</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>
Power Distance	80	70
Individualism/Collectivism	15	15
Masculinity	40	50
Uncertainty Avoidance	65	55
Long-Term Orientation	4	27
Indulgence	72	18

## **Results**

The study generated a substantial amount of material. Here, the researcher concentrates on the relevance of the first two Hofstede et al. (2010) factors because their relevance to the effectiveness of training is most noticeable. This may be because these factors are more likely to

reflect key economic and political approaches. Many other factors could be regarded as examples of inter-country differences that any effective trainer would take into account.

## **Power distance**

### ***The importance of the status of local leaders in making training effective***

Both Burkina Faso and Ghana had very high scores on the power distance dimension. This indicates that people tend to accept hierarchy without questioning it. In a training context, it is important to understand these dynamics to build trust among all stakeholders. Power distance was demonstrated in both Ghana and Burkina Faso by the fact that White Westerners “had the answers, because if White traveled here, I must listen.” Titles were equally important. If participants were reverends or had any kinds of affiliations with the Church, they were automatically respected and trusted by the rest of the group. People tended to let reverends speak first and pray at the beginning and end of each training day. Moreover, academic titles appeared to matter to trainees. Trainers holding a PhD or those who were doctoral students were “important people.” One participant exemplified this idea when he said: “You know here, it makes you look like someone if you have a title and you get respect and recognition.”

Trainees appeared more likely to accept training from white people, religious leaders, and those with academic qualifications. When the trainers fit the profile previously mentioned, the researcher observed higher enrollment and attendance as well as greater engagement with the training and subsequent transfer of what had been learned.

### ***Building trust when trainers are from a former colonial occupier of the country***

Additional evidence of the power distance dimension came from the researcher’s French background. In Burkina Faso, in particular, the researcher was acutely aware of the impact of the French colonizers on the country. Before going to Burkina Faso for the first time, she had read

extensively and learned about the Burkinabe culture and traditions. In her training, she constantly focused on building trust among the participants and stated numerous times that they were “the experts and that she was facilitating the training and eager to learn from them.” She also committed to work with school leaders over time, meaning the participants saw her on numerous occasions and built a strong rapport with her. These factors eased the participants’ minds’ as one of them summarized their sentiment:

For a while, the only time we saw White people was when they took everything from us, our goods, our land, and our families. You are different and one of us and we trust that you will work with us for our good. We know that because you keep coming back to help us.

The argument here is that under these circumstances, trust will need to be built if training is to be effective.

### **Individualism/collectivism**

#### ***Overcoming cultural barriers to effective learning***

Both countries are considered collectivistic societies, as they both scored a 15 on the scale. However, the cultural norm in the education sector - the standard way of teaching in these countries - is ‘stand and deliver’, in which the teacher or facilitator stands and lectures. In the leadership training, participants were actively involved in their learning and the group was used to leverage that learning. As a result, the wider national cultural norm found precedence over the cultural structures of the education system and removed a barrier to effective learning.

#### ***Collective cultural norms held back effective self-reflection and feedback***

When it came to self-reflection, a key component of adult learning (Mezirow, 2000), the trainees and local facilitators in both countries had a hard time critiquing each other and

themselves. The collectivistic culture seemed to have created a ‘culture of nice’ where everything was suitable and it did not appear customary to engage in reflection and give feedback. This finding seems to be tangential to the learning style literature where learning style may reflect individual preferences or be culturally influenced (Pimpa, 2009).

### **Discussion**

These findings suggest that for those providing training in other countries, it may be important to build trust, anchor the training among local leaders, and consider how culture may affect learning style. In the training studied here, the researcher found that the building of trust also opened up further ways of making the training more effective. This enabled the group text function of *WhatsApp* as a sustainable and affordable way to follow up post-training with the Ghanaian participants (Brion, 2018; Swaffield, Jull, & Ampah-Mensah, 2013). Burkinabe participants could not take part in the mobile technology intervention because participants did not own a smart phone. This post-training intervention was “brilliant” according to participants because “it reminded us of the training, encouraged us, and made us learned more from peers.” Creating a *WhatsApp* group was effective and promoted the transfer of new knowledge. As one participant said: “We saw our colleagues post things they had done at their schools so it motivated us to implement too.” In addition to using *WhatsApp* groups, the researcher asked participants from previous cohorts to come to lunch during one of the training days to offer testimonials on how they implemented the knowledge from the training. This practice was effective because trainees heard from peers how they transferred the newly acquired knowledge.

As seen from the participants’ responses, trainees were more inclined to transfer knowledge when facilitators focused on building robust relationships based on trust from the onset of the training. Bryk and Schneider (2003) asserted that relational trust is comprised of

genuine listening, social respect, respectful exchanges, being able to disagree and feel heard, and feeling valued.

The shared pre-training information seemed to have been essential in the cultures studied, which concurs with Yang et al. (2009). However, in their theoretical study, the authors combined the pre-training with the trainees' characteristics. Based on the findings of this current study, the researcher posits that pre-training is an additional dimension that has the potential to affect learning transfer. For example, in Burkina Faso, training participants requested that they receive a detailed, hour by hour schedule of the training activities prior to the training. They also wanted to know the logistical details and whether there would be an opening ceremony. Pre-training should be added to Broad and Newstrom's (1992) six factors that enhance or hinder learning transfer.

### **Recommendations for practice**

The researcher proposes two recommendations for practice. First, training organizers and practitioners should consider that cultural factors have the potential to affect the organization, delivery, and follow up post-training. To this end, the researcher provided a checklist to help optimize learning transfer. For example, trainers and organizers should pay close attention to the pre-training and post-training periods. For the pre-training, practitioners should consider using a pre-course questionnaire to get to know their audience prior to the offset of the training. Such questionnaire could include questions related to the participants' learning styles, their motivations, their goals, their hobbies, and their cultural background. This questionnaire could be used to plan the training and its content. For the post-training initiatives, coaching and mentoring using technology could be beneficial and cost effective when working internationally or remotely locally.

Second, it is necessary that the facilitators remain flexible and open to learning about different cultures and adjust their practices accordingly without judgement. As noted in this study, it is also important that trainers reflect on the impact their culture has on participants and colleagues in terms of language, history, and traditions. Similarly, when working internationally, it is essential to educate trainers about the host culture and educate trainers about the guest culture if they are from the host country. One tool that could be used is Hofstede Insights, a phone application designed by the Hofstede group that provides information about various cultures, articles, and other valuable training. In addition, establishing clear norms for the work, forming a common language, and creating robust relationships based on trust are of utmost importance.

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted to identify cultural factors in Burkina Faso and Ghana that may be related to training effectiveness and, in particular, the transfer of learning from the training to the actual job. The context was the provision of training in these countries by institutions and people from outside these countries. The cultural dimensions model of Hofstede et al. (2010) can be useful in showing a country's cultural factors, particularly those relating to questions of power and economic organization. The literature on training transfer is vast, so further research should focus on exploring culture as a factor in transfer and the effect of a country's stage of economic development. On the basis of the present study, the author offers a checklist to help trainers identify good practice in relation to cultural factors.



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## Check List for Practitioners

### Instructions for using the checklists

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this checklist is to help practitioners enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills to the workplace by taking into consideration national culture when planning, conducting, and evaluating training events.

#### *Who can use the checklist?*

All stakeholders, training organizers and facilitators are encouraged to use this checklist before, during and after training.

- Understand the role of national culture, organizational, departmental, and other micro culture in transfer of training
- Understand how culture affects leadership styles
- Understand how culture affects the way individuals resolve conflicts
- Understand that culture affects how trainers, organizers, and supervisors view the world and react to it
- Understand that culture affects men and women, as well as youth and elderly differently.
- Understand the need to be culturally competent, creating a personal cultural capital.
- Understand the culture, micro and macro, in which the training takes place and for who the training is delivered
- Understand that culture is individualistic or collectivistic; would determine how trainers deliver training event
- Recruit facilitators who acknowledge and are aware of cultural differences.
- Offer training in cultural intelligence to facilitators.
- Trainers meeting: review of culturally appropriate materials, participant overview, share schedule & other logistic information, and share any other valuable information about training, content, and trainees.

- Set goals with trainees.
- Share joining instructions, briefing notes, and pre-training questionnaire.
- Understand the levels of motivation.
- Understand the cultural background of all stakeholders.
- Understand that different learning styles will be present in the training.
- Understand different languages and writing styles might be present in the training.
- Facilitator is culturally competent.
- Materials are evidence-based, culturally relevant, and contextualized.
- Use of culturally responsive approaches.
- Consider gender-based training when culturally appropriate
- Use of culturally responsive post training interventions