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Abstract

In this paper we describe the experience of developing a practicum involving OD interventions in Kiev, Ukraine. Our intent was to provide students with experience doing OD interventions in an international setting. We found that the opportunity also created a valuable experience for understanding a different culture. As faculty, we found that the program development called for unique relationships with people in Kiev. We offer a proposition for collaboration among universities for developing similar opportunities.

Comments

Academy of Management, Organization Development and Change Division, "Building ODC as an Academic Discipline," 7-8 April 2006, International House, University of Pennsylvania.

Creating an International OD Practicum in Kiev¹

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In this paper we describe the experience of developing a practicum involving organization development (OD) interventions in Kiev, Ukraine. Our intent in the practicum was two fold. We wanted students to try out their OD practitioner skills in an international setting. We also wanted them to understand better a different culture, not as tourists but through a first-hand experience of working with organization in the country. As faculty, we found that the program development required certain skills and relationships which we describe. We conclude by offering a proposition for collaboration among universities for developing similar opportunities.

Establishing the practicum in Kiev

At the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, doctoral students in OD are required to participate in a practicum in each of their three years of classes. The purpose is to provide a means for students to apply the OD skills that they are learning in classes. When they complete their degree, they have theoretical knowledge about OD and the experience of doing original research, and they have a set of skills tested in a field. Our goal is to graduate students who can do high quality OD interventions, and who have confidence in their abilities, confidence that has been affirmed by experience.

¹ This paper was written for the “Building ODC as an Academic Discipline Conference,” held at the University of Pennsylvania, April 7-8, 2006.

In 2004 Dr. Alla Heorhiadi proposed to the Organization Learning & Development department that she create a practicum in Kiev. Dr. Heorhiadi, who has a Ph.D. in Economics from Ukraine, is completing her Ed.D. in OD at the University of St. Thomas. She was uniquely qualified to create the practicum because she had been a professor at the premier business school in Ukraine and had in the business community the network that is necessary for arranging for sites for the students' interventions. In February 2004 she arranged for four students to spend a week at two sites in Kiev, a consulting firm and a business school. They worked in pairs, and they completed the practicum by sending the clients a report of findings and recommendations, and writing a reflection paper about their learnings. Students and clients gave high praise to the experience. Students reported that they have benefited greatly from this international practicum. Following the success of the first practicum, we offered a second experience in Kiev in February 2006. This time, ten students from the University of St. Thomas, working in pairs, did their interventions at five sites. The companies varied from a small private language school to market leaders with multi-million-dollar revenues.

Setting up the interventions: the entry stage

Because students would have one week to complete the face-to-face aspect of their interventions, we determined that we had to manage the entry into the organizations for two reasons. The first reason was practical. Finding organizations that would allow students in to do significant work took time. Hours of emails and phone calls preceded an agreement between each organization and the department. We set the following criteria for organizations:

a) organizations had to have enough people who speak English to make the interventions feasible for students;

b) organizations had to be willing to accept students as consultants, and to provide them with access to people and information; and

c) organizations had to be logistically accessible to students without difficulty.

The second reason was cultural. We believed that Dr. Heorhiadi's network was essential to gaining access to organizations. The culture in this former Soviet Republic is, in Hofstede's terms, one of high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance indexes (Hofstede, 2004). In practical terms these characteristics add complexity to the entry phase of an intervention.

Personal relationships are the coin of the realm in Ukraine. Trust is difficult to establish without knowing someone personally, or knowing someone who knows someone. Trust is also the necessary factor in getting companies to open their doors to doctoral students so that they can have access to the people and information they need to manage an OD intervention.

Preparing students

For students to be successful in Kiev, they need to have an understanding of international cultures in general and Ukrainian culture in specific. To prepare students for the practicum, we had a pre-requisite course: Cross-cultural Aspects of OD, which included the frameworks of Hofstede (2004) and Trompenaars (1998) and armed students with concepts and language to decipher their experience. In addition, we offered orientation sessions to introduce students to Ukrainian culture, history and gave them practical tips of how to survive and succeed in Kiev.

Language issues

Language is a potential barrier to developing OD practica, in two ways. First, to negotiate the interventions one has to be fluent in the native language. Even though we worked

with companies for whom English was a commonly spoken language, when it came to the fine-tuning of expectations, speaking in the native language was essential. For Ukraine this can be either Ukrainian or Russian.

Second, our students are English speakers, so they have to work in English. This means finding organizations that speak English, or working through translators. Even when clients say they are fluent in English, we found that there were problems. Having someone on hand in Kiev to troubleshoot miscommunications was essential. For instance, in one organization there was a communication problem between the students and clients. We learned of the problem on the first day, and the next morning Dr. Heorhiadi visited the company to insure that the intervention was not derailed by a communication problem.

Creating success in the practica

We have three goals that contribute to our definition of success in the practica. First, we want the clients to be satisfied, to perceive that they have been served well. Satisfying the client is a goal in any intervention. In addition, each successful intervention contributes to the reputation of the University of St. Thomas program. Each year we have to find organizations that will open their doors to students and allow them to participate in confidential matters. Word travels quickly in Kiev, as elsewhere. The good reputation of the program will help to recruit organizations for similar practica in the future. So for the program to continue, student interventions need to be successful.

Second, students need to succeed in managing an OD intervention that is based on the OD theory. For instance, there are steps to the OD process, starting with entry and ending with separation, that we expect to be followed. For the student to be successful they need to follow the

concepts they have learned, and thereby to confirm the validity of what they have learned. OD interventions may be more difficult in a country like Ukraine, where there is little knowledge of OD as we know it. For instance, some clients wanted “expert evaluation” based on document review rather than action research. Part of our task is to make sure that both clients and students have clear expectations about what will be included in an OD intervention.

Third, students need to develop their self-confidence as international OD consultants. Students who are trying out their OD skills can be hesitant, afraid that they might not be able to manage the complex task of conducting an OD intervention. If they fail, then their failure may weaken their confidence as OD consultants. Our goal is to strengthen students’ confidence through successful interventions.

To have practica successful as is described above, we decided to allow Dr. Heorhiadi, the practicum coordinator, to do the entry phase on all sites. This increased possibility of project success. We cannot afford failure in an overseas project. Most students will not be able to have the opportunity to work overseas again. It is not like failing in their home country, where they can try again. For students having a successful international OD intervention will benefit their OD practices in the future.

Student learnings

For students, the experience was eye-opening, far beyond what we have seen in US-based practica. The students’ learnings were personal, cultural and organizational. They expected a former Soviet city in which all business practices are inferior to what we find in the US. Instead they found themselves in a city founded in 700 AD, 700 years before Columbus discovered

North America for the Europeans. Kiev is a city of 3.5 million with a rich culture and heritage that included but also transcended the period of Soviet occupation.

“We thought it would be a Soviet type of culture, but these folks would put many American firms to shame.”

They discovered the land of the Orange Revolution, in which a nation stood up to a corrupt election process and government and demanded fairness. One student commented *“Now I understand what Meg Wheatley meant when she said she wanted to be a Ukrainian”* (This refers to Wheatley’s comments at the 2005 ODNetwork Conference in which she said, after reading about the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, that she now “wanted to be a Ukrainian.”)

They also discovered the new entrepreneurial ventures that have transformed Ukraine. *“We were amazed by the energy and passion people had for their work and the organization. American companies would die to have that level of commitment and passion.”*

One of the aspects of life in modern Ukraine is the entrepreneurial organizations are young. They have eschewed managers trained in the Soviet period (which ended with Ukrainian independence in 1992). Most of the people working for the new companies with which we worked with were under the age of 30. Few managers or employees in modern entrepreneurial companies are over 40. When our students came to a Kiev-based consulting company, one of the employees said, *“I was surprised that you were so old.”* She then explained that they were told that students from America were coming to work with them. They, of course, assumed that American students would be young. She added, *“It would be like my mother going back to school!”*

Conclusions about establishing similar practica

University of St. Thomas students have benefited from our ability to penetrate the personal relationship network in Kiev. We believe that only someone with significant experience and relationships in a foreign country can have the relationships to develop OD intervention experiences.

First, the person who coordinates the practicum must be fluent in the language. The process of negotiating the interventions, particularly with people who do not understand OD, calls for absolute fluency, both in language and in the nuances that come from culture.

Second, the person must have a network in the country and consequently an access to companies through this network. Asking for students to come into one's company and to have access to confidential information requires trust. In relationship-based cultures such trust is built upon one's network.

Third, the person must understand OD. In Kiev, we experienced some challenges when negotiating requirements for projects. The understanding of OD in the two countries is somewhat different. Some companies merely wanted "expert consulting". The Ukrainian clients' attitudes to change management, conflict, and leadership development are based on different cultural assumptions. Dr. Heorhiadi's role became one of finding possible companies, explaining the basics of OD to them, and then finding a common understanding of what might work best for the companies. Thus, one of her tasks became the entry phase of an OD intervention. This may be the lesson for practica. To do an intervention in countries like Ukraine, someone has to pave the way, in effect doing the entry phase of the intervention.

Proposal

We believe that such experiences can be successful when people who organize practica embrace certain features: 1) availability of personal relationships in the country of practica, 2) fluency in language as well as culture, 3) knowledge of OD, and 4) ability to conduct the entry phase of the intervention. Therefore, we expect that the opportunities for creating successful OD practica in foreign countries are limited. We would like to explore with others the possibility of forming a consortium of universities that might develop a series of such practica, using the people like Dr. Heorhiadi who have the requisite skill and experience to negotiate practica in their countries.

To conclude, we offer the following students' comments:

“The team practicum experience in Ukraine was a unique combination of cultural immersion, technical learning, and an application of organization development (OD) philosophy. It was a first opportunity to utilize my overall business background in combination with a variety of academic principles learned from class work associated with the OD program.”

“Quite an experience - I wouldn't trade it for anything!! In the role as a consultant, I felt that I was able to draw on my professional experience as well as the academic background gained in the past two years. Clearly, I have considerable work left to develop this practice and art. However, the work completed in Ukraine has given me new confidence to pursue my goal to become an independent OD consultant in the future.”

“...the entire experience with the practicum in Ukraine was amazing. As a cohort, there is a feeling that we have made lifelong connections with the group. However, the experience in

Ukraine would appear to have given the participating students a galvanizing feeling that cannot be truly shared with the other members of the cohort.”

“We found the practicum to be an outstanding experience. Doing an international practicum is something we would recommend to future cohorts.”

References

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