

## A Smile is a Smile is not a Smile?

### Communication and Co-operation in an Intercultural Context in the Field

**Communication is the base for human collaboration. However, communication does not necessarily result in understanding. Cross-cultural communication continually involves misunderstanding caused by misperceptions and misinterpretations. Reasons are national and organisational cultures, differences in the socio-economic background, in life experience, in language and values. An intercultural communication training helps to develop new perspectives.**

*Good contacts with her neighbour* were important to Erika\* after she had moved from Germany to a small town in Tanzania\*, where her husband started an assignment as development worker at a local trades school. The African neighbours had a girl of the same age as her daughter and the girls spent a lot of time playing together. The girl's mother was also very friendly with Erika and these relationships were important for the well-being of the whole family in this completely new environment. After some time, however, the neighbour's daughter stopped coming to the house. When Erika talked to her mother she was friendly but came up with new excuses each time. After a few weeks it was clear that the nice relationship was over. Erika was very frustrated because she had not the slightest idea about the reasons for this sudden change.

*The trainer divided the participants* in two groups after Erika had presented her problem during a seminar on intercultural communication and co-operation of their seconding organisation Service Overseas (DÜ). Africans and Europeans were asked to separately analyse the case of Erika and develop hypotheses regarding the reasons behind that change in her neighbour's behaviour. The groups came up with quite different assumptions and especially the findings of the African group were a real eye-opener for Erika who now realised what might have happened. Some suggested that the husband of their African neighbours could be afraid to see his wife and daughter exposed to a different culture and their comparative wealth, fearing that they would be dissatisfied with what he could offer them. In a next step the group assisted Erika to develop a different role towards the other family which may lead to a new behaviour and relationship.

### **Developing new perspectives**

*To enhance the problem solving capacity* of participants working in an intercultural context is the primary objective of these intercultural seminars of which we have already facilitated 3, with 2 more coming up in 2002. Additionally, development workers, managers and staff of the partner institutions are given a forum to share their experience of working in the DÜ partner system. The communication training starts with awareness raising with regard to selective perception and a systemic view of problems. In the following phase of case consulting, the trainer introduces problem solving strategies on the basis of actual conflicts which are presented by the participants and discussed in small groups. To enable a transfer of theoretical knowledge into reality, actions are planned on individual, project, and organisational level, and a mutual monitoring system is decided upon.

*Conflicts in workplace relationships* are most frequently presented in the case consulting sessions. Sometimes problems are so serious that they are picked as an example by more than one of the affected parties in their respective small groups. Like the case of Joachim\* who was posted as a technical advisor to a development organisation in Cameroon\*, just

to find himself entangled in a power struggle within the organisation of the counterpart who did not accept his advisory role. At least this was his version of the story which was also presented by the director of the local partner institution and by Joachim's wife in their respective small groups. In each of these groups the conflict situation was reconstructed with the help of other neutral participants who play-acted the roles of the different conflict parties. After many different perspectives had been developed in those 3 small groups, all persons involved in the actual conflict were assembled in a concluding session with the trainer. As a result, they learned to respect each other as humans and to resolve their conflicts on the level of facts rather than of mutual assumptions. As we were told much later, the working relationship of the 2 main opponents improved considerably for the remaining years of Joachim's assignment.

## **Design and facilitation of conferences**

*Intercultural seminars are one example* for our services in the field of conference design. We will design a special event, learning situation for you, matching your special context of work.

*Bringing people together to exchange* ideas and to develop and pursue new issues is the intention with which conferences, seminars and workshops are held. All too often, however, the results expected by the organisers of a conference are not achieved. Inviting experts for inputs does not necessarily guarantee success. Such meetings can only be successful if certain factors are taken into consideration from the very beginning. The expected outcome should be clearly defined and the people to be invited have to be carefully chosen. Then the structure of the meeting can be designed so as to assist people achieve their set objectives. Professional facilitation is a key to success. Whenever possible, we assemble teams of professional facilitators and trainers from the North and the South working as a team.

*The right choice of conference facilities* helps to create a constructive working atmosphere. Reliable correspondence ahead of the meeting assures that all participants are informed about the contents and logistics of the event. Smoothly organised travel arrangements enable organisers and participants to concentrate on the topics of the conference. To improve the preparation and follow-up we offer to organise and conduct internet-based, pre- and post-conference meetings.

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\*all names and places are changed