

Safety Across Cultures

Understanding the Challenges

By Michael A. Flynn, Elizabeth Castellanos and Augusto Flores-Andrade

As supply chains and businesses become more global, safety professionals must develop and carry out work-based safety programs in cross-cultural settings. Safety professionals work on both sides of these exchanges: companies send safety professionals to oversee operations in a foreign country, and foreign companies employ local safety personnel. In either case, safety professionals must adjust their own approaches to safety, and that of their organizations, to effectively adapt to the global economy.

Safety professionals need both theoretical and practical tools to promote OSH while working cross-culturally. These tools help safety professionals identify the importance of culture and better understand different cultures so they can work effectively with employees they supervise, as well as with those who supervise them. This article discusses key areas that safety professionals should consider when evaluating their individual capacity, and that of the institutions they represent, to promote safety in cross-cultural settings. It highlights common challenges, approaches and mistakes that safety profes-

sionals and organizations make when working cross culturally. Finally, it provides a starting point for learning how to identify and avoid these mistakes.

Culture & Safety

The first step to address culture and safety is to understand culture. Although culture is a common concept in our society, people often have an easier time giving examples of culture than defining it. Indeed, even events that promote respect for workplace diversity often focus on outward manifestations of culture, such as food or holidays. However, culture plays a much deeper role in our lives than simply the clothes we wear or the food we eat. To remain effective, competitive and safe, organizations need managers and safety professionals who can understand culture's role in the workplace and can navigate cultural differences (Kanter, 1995).

Culture can be defined in many ways. For OSH, we can understand culture as a system of shared beliefs and behaviors that affects how workers from different ethnic and social groups perceive, understand, adapt to and address safety concerns

Michael A. Flynn is a social scientist and coordinator of the Occupational Health Equity program at NIOSH. He is a leader in the field of occupational health equity and frequently presents and publishes on topics such as cross-cultural safety promotion, intervention effectiveness, institutional culture change and workforce diversity. He has published in German, Spanish and English and presents at academic and professional meetings throughout the U.S. and internationally. Flynn holds a graduate degree in Anthropology from University of Cincinnati and is a research fellow of the Consortium for Multicultural Psychology Research at Michigan State University.

Elizabeth Castellanos is a leader in international safety with more than 15 years' experience developing comprehensive and functional business practices with culturally diverse multinational organizations. She has worked in EHS leadership positions in several Fortune 500 companies providing strategic direction to improve safety, health and environmental performance by introducing global systems to drive organizational cultural change. Castellanos is global supply chain

safety and environment manager for Heineken International, where she oversees the safety of operations for 175 breweries, malteries, cider plants and other production facilities in 70 countries. Castellanos is founder of ASSE's Mexico Chapter. She holds a bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering from Mexico's National Polytechnic Institute.

Augusto Flores-Andrade is a safety professional with more than 25 years' experience working with multinational companies and a multiethnic workforce. He has played a safety leadership role with companies from Canada, U.S. and Brazil on the construction of the New Quito International Airport. He has also held safety leadership positions with multinational oil companies operating in his native Ecuador. He works as an independent consultant for ARSEIN and is cofounder, former president and current Coordinator of ASSE's Ecuador Section. Flores-Andrade holds a degree in Civil Engineering from Catholic University of Quito, and two master's degrees in Safety, Health and Environment from universities in Ecuador, Chile and Spain.



IN BRIEF

• Culture shapes how humans understand their world; as a result, it affects the work of safety professionals.

• In an increasingly global economy, safety professionals must be able to address culture-related issues to be effective and marketable.

• Whether working at home or abroad, safety professionals must be aware of culture's impact on their work.

• Cross-cultural understanding is essential for safety buy-in, but OSH professionals are rarely explicitly trained in cross-cultural competency.

at work. A group of people builds culture through social interaction, which shapes how they think, act and feel in the world (Carpenter-Song, Schwalie & Longhofer, 2007). This ranges from the esoteric (e.g., what is beauty) to the mundane (e.g., how we manage time). These interactions develop in response to specific physical and socioeconomic contexts. Remove these behaviors and beliefs from their context and they can lose their logic or meaning, and even become counterproductive.

Examples of cultural factors that can affect safety at work are how:

- a coworker and a boss understand safety and who is responsible for it;
- subordinates, equals and superiors can appropriately interact with each other;
- people say work is done and how work is actually done;
- employees perceive work dangers relative to other risks they face in their daily lives;
- employees adapt to workplace dangers;
- these understandings are similar or different for workers with different cultural backgrounds.

For example, Gibson, Szkudlarek and McDaniel (2012) conducted an international study on team effectiveness in multinational corporations. To their surprise, they discovered the concept of *team* differed significantly from one culture to the next. Participants from different cultures often used different metaphors (e.g., military, sports, community, family, associates) to describe teamwork. For example, people from cultures that used sports metaphors when referring to a work team often expected their interaction with team members to consist only of meetings at work. They expected discussions to focus on project details, with occasional social interactions often related to the project. In contrast, people from cultures that used family metaphors when referring to a work team often expected to have more social interactions outside work in which team members could share other aspects of their lives (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2002).

These examples suggest that different cultural approaches to the concept of team and other aspects of work can affect how team members:

- contribute to a group's work;
- relate to each other;
- make sacrifices for and commit to the project and to each other;
- expect other group members and the team leader to behave;
- reward behaviors meeting cultural expectations;
- correct members whose behavior is inconsistent with cultural expectations.

The researchers concluded that to effectively work cross-culturally, a professional must understand the local perceptions and approaches to key concepts and core issues. This includes work, safety and relationships with coworkers and supervisors (Gibson, et al., 2012).

Challenges Working Cross-Culturally

Understanding Your Own Perspective

To develop cross-cultural competence, safety professionals should understand that they come from a cultural background and social context that affect how they approach safety and their job. This can be difficult to understand. Just as a fish may not know that it swims in water, people often do not recognize how much our culture orients the way we interact with and attach meaning to everything. Indeed, one function of culture is to produce a common understanding of basic concepts such as family, work and safety so they do not have to be continually explained.

As a result, we often assume that how we organize, understand or react to something is universally shared rather than a culturally biased

The Risks of Ignoring Culture

- Programs are not adequately adapted to local contexts.
- Effective local solutions may be overlooked.
- Barriers to implementation may be misunderstood and, as a result, inadequately addressed.
- Employees may implement changes only superficially.

response. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges in cross-cultural work is not overcoming the obvious differences between cultures but rather understanding how culture affects what seem to be commonsensical, universal concepts such as family, work or safety.

When culturally based assumptions go unchecked, safety professionals may think their understanding or approach is objective, right or “the way things should be done.” Unwittingly, they often impose their concept of workplace safety and how to achieve it, even

when alternative approaches may be equally effective and more culturally appropriate, or more likely to find widespread acceptance. In addition, by not recognizing the value of other cultures’ understandings, safety professionals run the risk of alienating their colleagues and employees, and hindering safety efforts.

Seeing Barriers That May Be Rooted in Culture

When safety professionals attempt to implement programs in a foreign culture, they may experience frustration when concepts or practices are not easily translated. For example, using the differing understandings of *team* as noted, a safety professional may experience frustration if employees want to spend team time discussing personal lives, or if employees seem disengaged from a team that is strictly focused on work. Rather than assume employees are somehow deficient or unwilling to adopt safety initiatives, however, the safety professional must recognize that barriers to success may in fact be rooted in cultural differences.

One challenge of transnational commerce is the traditional one-way flow of capital investments and technological knowledge from companies in the industrialized world to developing countries, and the implicit power relationships that have developed as a result (ILO, 1988; Rantanen, Lehtinen & Savolainen, 2004). For example, safety policies, practices, techniques and equipment often develop in industrialized nations, then companies export and carry them out in developing countries, and not the other way around (London & Kisting, 2002).

This frequently happens because the OSH infrastructure of the industrialized nations is greater than the infrastructure found in the developing world. Although this technological transfer can lead to technical improvements, if not done carefully it can lead to implementing processes, standards or equipment that are not appropriate or practical for the local setting (London & Kisting, 2002). Because of this pattern of technology and knowledge transfer, safety professionals must be even more attuned to cultural barriers that could hinder the implementation or acceptance of safety measures.

Increasing Diversity in the Global Economy

A hallmark of the global economy is the growing trade among developing countries in Latin American, Asia and Africa, often called South-South

trade. This name references the more traditional North-South trade patterns between the industrialized (e.g., Europe, U.S.) and developing countries in areas such as Latin America (Priyadarshi, 2015). In 2012, South-South trade represented a quarter of all international trade (UNCTAD, 2013).

The growing prevalence of South-South trade is significant for safety professionals for two reasons. First, the expanding size and diversity of international trade leads to increasing variety of cultures that safety professionals must successfully navigate. Professionals, especially contractors, must become more flexible and adept at developing and carrying out safety programs and procedures in companies with different cultural backgrounds and expectations regarding safety practices and procedures. They must do this while ensuring that local rules and regulations are followed. Safety professionals who develop skills for working with persons and companies from varied cultural backgrounds, not just Western industrialized nations, can more effectively meet the safety needs of foreign investors and the local labor force (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004).

Second, South-South trade increases the regulatory variety safety professionals will encounter. In North-South relationships, the northern partners from North America and Europe differ culturally but often have similar regulatory frameworks and practices. As a result, safety professionals would need to be adept cross-culturally, but could generally expect consistency in safety norms and expectations.

With South-South trade, however, safety professionals are faced with a wide range of safety norms and regulatory backgrounds, in addition to increased cultural diversity. For example, companies from growing economic powers of the developing world such as China have increased their investments and business operations in Latin America (Flannery, 2012).

This presents unique challenges for safety professionals because many of these companies come from countries with a less-developed tradition of OSH compared to industrial nations (Rantanen, et al., 2004). For example, Chinese companies operating in Latin America are increasingly concerned with enforcing labor standards and corporate social responsibility, but they tend to come from a weaker tradition of OSH (Brown & O’Rourke, 2003; Chen & Chan, 2010; Wang & Tao, 2012). They lag behind their counterparts from countries with a stronger OSH tradition, such as U.S. (Flannery, 2012).

Practices for Safety Professionals Working in a Foreign Culture

Recognize the Context & Appreciate Context-Specific Solutions

Safety professionals from industrialized countries may overlook or underappreciate approaches to safety in the developing world that effectively respond to local conditions and constraints. This can happen if the approaches do not use the same level of technology or conform to common practices used in the safety professional’s home country.

Safety professionals often focus on carrying out the technical aspects of the program in the same way they do in their home country in a genuine effort to improve safety in new locations. This approach often focuses on goals, objectives and programs successfully developed and used in the home country. This focus often ignores the need to adapt programs to local conditions. In the authors' experience, this happens when the safety professional is not trained in the importance of considering the local context in which these safety practices and attitudes have developed.

For example, engineering controls developed in Europe or the U.S. are often resource-intensive and the safety program's social aspects are designed for the cultural and socioeconomic realities of their country of origin. Training effectively prepares professionals to promote safety in one context (e.g., a U.S. company), but not necessarily in another. Training may not effectively prepare professionals to adapt scientific findings and general principles of safety to the cultural and socioeconomic reality of small to medium companies outside of their home countries. When this occurs, local safety practices are judged against the foreign social context of the visiting safety professionals, and can result in unnecessarily negative evaluations of local safety practices.

This can be problematic because safety beliefs and practices evolve to meet the needs of specific physical and social realities that can differ from one place to another (Nuwayhid, 2004). Safety procedures and programs that are created in one social context often fail when carried out in another. Failures occur because programs and procedures do not address the constraints and opportunities of the local reality. Such a situation frequently results in workers adopting behaviors superficially in an effort to please the new boss, but does not create lasting change that permeates employees' general approach to work or the company's approach to safety. When the safety professional is not watching or returns home, workers and managers often return to doing things the way they did before.

Accounting for the local context is particularly important when international safety professionals hold supervisory positions over local counterparts. If the local context is not accounted for, the natural power dynamic between supervisor and employee can result in the local safety professionals deferring to their superior's interpretation of the situation. Local employees may feel unable to discuss cultural differences or program barriers with superiors, and may be more likely to make changes only superficially.

This is not to suggest that all local safety practices are always effective or that they could not be improved. Neither do the authors suggest that safety professionals have nothing to offer workers in other countries. On the contrary, OSH professionals working in cross-cultural settings gain experience and knowledge by interacting with their counterparts from other countries and bring new perspectives to the local setting. The exchange of ideas on the technical and social aspects of safety

across countries can contribute much to developing good safety practices. Rather, the authors' point is that safety professionals must account for the local social context when they determine what is and is not an effective, appropriate process, procedure or approach to safety.

Get Input

To be effective, safety professionals working across cultures need to be open to new ideas and suggestions from the workers and their local professional colleagues (Gibson, et al., 2012). Programs must be adapted to the local cultural context with input from local employees (Geller, 2001).

When worker input is obtained, the meaning of even the most obvious concepts must be verified. Safety professionals must not assume a common understanding between themselves and employees. As Gibson, et al. (2012), show with the teamwork example, even apparently common-sense ideas can lead to differing expectations about what, by whom and how work is done. Indeed, the authors suggest that what appear to be commonsensical ideas are the most important to focus on.

Further, Gibson, et al. (2012), have shown that working effectively in unfamiliar cultural settings takes being self-aware and open to doubt, discomfort and paradox, a difficult position for those accustomed to an authoritative role or already occupied by cultural adjustments and job demands. Although what Gibson, et al. (2012), recommend may not sound attractive at first, the authors have found that, when implemented correctly, the process can result in a profoundly significant and gratifying professional experience.

Practices for Safety Professionals Working With Foreign Companies

Safety professionals traveling abroad are not the only ones who need to understand the effects of culture in the workplace. Professionals who work in their home cultures with foreign companies must be able to appreciate and navigate the cultural differences inherent in their workplace interactions.

This can take place in several ways. Those in supervisory roles may find themselves as a cultural translator, positioned in between local employees and a foreign firm. In this position, they need to be particularly sensitive to their own cultural biases and those of their employees so they can effectively communicate these differences or barriers to the company with which they work. In addition to serving as a cultural broker or translator, safety professionals may also need to be a quick study of the foreign company's culture to understand expectations for communication and program implementation.

Recommendations for Safety Professionals

- Recognize your own cultural bias and that of coworkers. No one is without cultural bias.
- Seek input on local context and meanings, and on the appropriateness of programs and initiatives.
- Recognize the importance of local context to developing and implementing successful safety measures.

Steps to Cross-Cultural Understanding

Observe

- How are ideas presented? Pay attention to tone, body language and metaphors.
- How are decisions made, in or out of official settings?
- Look for congruence or inconsistency between what people say and what they do.

Ask Questions

- Ask questions about things that seem commonsensical. These assumptions are how most misunderstandings happen.
- Ask questions more than once. Make questioning a normal part of interactions.
- Ask for specific examples of positive and negative interactions. In the answer, listen for clues about:
 - employer-employee relations;
 - how conflict is addressed in this setting (e.g., directly, indirectly);
 - expectations and understandings of safety;
 - the priority of safety in relation to other company priorities.

Be Open

- Be prepared to have your assumptions questioned.
- Make sure colleagues feel comfortable communicating with you about cultural differences.
- Be aware that power dynamics can impede communication, and may take time and concerted effort to overcome.

Conclusion

Safety professionals are increasingly called on to work in cross-cultural settings. They carry out programs in foreign countries, or they work with foreign companies in their own countries. To be effective, a safety professional must understand how culture affects his/her approach to safety and s/he must appreciate safety approaches developed in different cultural contexts.

Successful safety professionals will need to augment their technical expertise with skills and tools to identify and bridge these cultural differences. This means acknowledging the socioeconomic context where these perspectives developed. Understanding this context will address some of the disadvantages of the traditional North-South flow of OSH knowledge, technology and practices. This also allows safety professionals to address some of the challenges inherent in the global economy's emerging South-South business patterns.

Failure to successfully transfer safety programs cross-culturally is not always a safety professional's fault. Safety professionals operate within a larger context that affects how they work. A primary constraint is the employer's expectations. The employing company decides the amount of time a safety professional has to implement or turn around a safety program at a site, the metrics used to evaluate success and the latitude safety professionals have on how they do the job. All these factors can have a big effect on how the safety profession approaches the job.

Training, beyond technical expertise, will become increasingly important as the global economy grows and diversifies. This training should focus on the dynamics of promoting safety cross-culturally, both North-South and South-South. Safety professionals who develop the ability to work effectively in cross-cultural settings will be more marketable in the increasingly global economy.

This article outlines significant challenges. However, addressing them offers safety professionals

a chance to develop their skills while improving the lives of workers across the globe. The key is to make safety practices respond to local realities and emerging trends in the global economy. **PS**

References

- Brown, G.D. & O'Rourke, D. (2003). The race to China and implications for global labor standards. *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 9, 299-301.
- Carpenter-Song, E.A., Schwallie, M.N. & Longhofer, J. (2007). Cultural competence reexamined: Critique and directions for the future. *Psychiatric Services*, 58(10), 1362-1365.
- Chen, M. & Chan, A. (2010). Occupational health and safety in China: The case of state-managed enterprises. *International Journal of Health Services*, 40, 43-59.
- Earley, P.C. & Mosakowski, E. (2004, Oct.) Cultural intelligence. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2004/10/cultural-intelligence/ar/1>
- Flannery, N.P. (2012, Feb. 24). Are Chinese companies in Latin America paying attention to corporate social responsibility? *Forbes*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com/sites/nathanielparishflannery/2012/02/24/are-chinese-companies-in-latin-america-paying-attention-to-corporate-social-responsibility/2
- Geller, S.E. (2001). *Working safe: How to help people actively care for health and safety*. New York, NY: Lewis Publishers.
- Gibson, C.B. & Zellmer-Bruhn, M. (2002). Minding your metaphors: Applying the concept of teamwork metaphors to the management of teams in multicultural contexts. *Organizational Dynamics*, 31, 101-116.
- Gibson, C.B., Szkudlarek, B. & McDaniel, D. (2012). Tales from the (multinational) field: Toward developing research conducive to proximal theory building. In A.M. Ryan, F.T.L. Leong and F.L. Oswald (Eds.), *Conducting multinational research: Applying organizational psychology in the workplace*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (1988). *Safety, health and working conditions in the transfer of technology to developing countries*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.
- Kanter, R.M. (1995). *World class: Thriving locally in the global economy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- London, L. & Kisting, S. (2002). Ethical concerns in international occupational health and safety. *Occupational Medicine*, 17, 587-600.
- Nuwayhid, I.A. (2004). Occupational health research in developing countries: A partner for social justice. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94, 1916-1921.
- Priyadarshi, S. (2015, Dec. 21). South-South trade and its implications for the world economy. *International Banker*. Retrieved from <https://internationalbanker.com/finance/south-south-trade-and-its-implications-for-the-world-economy>
- Rantanen, J., Lehtinen, S. & Savolainen, K. (2004). The opportunities and obstacles to collaboration between developing and developed countries in the field of occupational health. *Toxicology*, 198, 63-74.
- UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2013, Dec. 16). South-South trade continues to increase, UNCTAD statistics show. Retrieved from <http://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=673>
- Wang, H. & Tao, L. (2012). Current situations and challenges of occupational disease prevention and control in China. *Industrial Health*, 50, 73-79.

Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of NIOSH.