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Do's and Don'ts for Training Diverse, Multicultural, and International Audiences

The standing-room-only crowd assembled for a session at a recent American Society for Training and Development conference was highly diverse, as was the costumed presenter, Fernando Sanchez-Arias. He is president and CEO of ODINAMICA, an international learning and consulting firm based in Venezuela.

For the presentation, Sanchez-Arias cast off his western suit coat and donned an international outfit that combined a colorful African headdress, a cropped Asian-style jacket, and traditional Dutch wooden clogs. Funny, instructive, and passionate about his topic, Sanchez-Arias was the embodiment of the engaging trainer.

To launch the session, he divided the audience into groups and asked each to list what to do and what to avoid doing when training multicultural groups. The comprehensive lists generated included the following:

Do:

- Respect local customs.
- Ask for feedback.
- Look for common ground.
- Use simple words.
- Check for understanding.
- Be patient and flexible.
- Translate handouts.

Do not:

- Use slang.
- Speak loudly.
- Over-generalize.
- Use acronyms and jargon.
- Underestimate trainees' knowledge.
- Stereotype.
- Make cultural jokes.

Sanchez-Arias offered several "do's" of his own, including: study the value of the cultures represented before training, be humble, and be aware of differences in expressiveness. For example, Latins are warmer, with big smiles and touches, whereas Scandinavians tend to be cooler, using fewer of both. He also encouraged the audience to be mindful of "faux amis," words or phrases that carry very different or even offensive meanings in other languages.

Another recommendation was to mix delivery and learning styles to accommodate individual preferences as well as cultural differences. As well, Sanchez-Arias recommends physical-contact tips, such as becoming aware of differences in personal space among diverse cultures.

Gestures matter, too. A raised fist is highly offensive to Venezuelans, but to a Brazilian audience the gesture suggests luck. Adapting content to the audience is critically important. Use local or familiar examples to illustrate your points. For example, if you are making a presentation on fire safety to a group of Hispanic employees, consider inviting a local, Spanish-speaking fire chief as a guest speaker.

Strategies for Success

As author and global presenter, Sanchez-Arias has distilled his advice into the following strategies for success. You may wish to incorporate some of these into your training or share them with your training staff.

- **Study the audience.** Ask for a list of participating trainees, with specifics about their background. The more you know, the more you can appeal to the group's culture and needs.
- **Welcome them with smiles.** Be open and inviting at the entrance of the room, expressing warmth and a positive attitude. (Sanchez-Arias is a master at this and, even in a lecture hall of several hundred, makes individuals feel welcome.)
- **Create learning teams.** Get trainees involved by gathering them into smaller groups. Ask for volunteers to write down findings, present the group's ideas, etc.
- **Open with a "culture touch."** Learn some native words or wear attire familiar to the participants.
- **Keep it simple.** The simpler the better when it comes to presentations. Use keywords, alliterations, and fill-in-the-blank exercises.
- **Listen carefully.** If you conduct a pre-training assessment of the group, pay attention to what was revealed and be mindful of the group's expectations.
- **Allow time for reflection.** Take time periodically during the training to ask participants to write down what they have learned, what they liked, etc.
- **Design a memorable closing.** To close, be inspiring, reflective, or whatever the needs of the audience suggest.