

PRACTICAL REPORT: INTERCULTURAL WORKSHOP AT ORACLE AUSTRIA GMBH

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Oracle's numerous subsidiaries include locations in six countries in Southeast Europe (Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia-Montenegro, Croatia, Bulgaria and Cyprus). Local managers are in charge of finances and human resources. They report directly to a director in Estonia and have dotted line reporting responsibility to a manager in Austria. There is an additional contact person in Ireland as well as cooperation with the "Shared Service Center" in India. An additional challenge of this complex organizational structure is that work is done by an intercultural virtual team.

Misunderstandings and obstacles to communications are to be expected. Oracle's numerous international contacts are handled very well by some managers, while others experience difficulties. This was the status quo when Oracle Austria invited us to conduct an intercultural workshop.

The predetermined **goal** of the workshop was enhancing the spirit of cooperation within teams and raising awareness for intercultural cooperation among participants.

Our **initial hypothesis** was that there are many obstacles to communication, which most certainly lead to difficulties in everyday cooperation. We consequently focused on the enhancement and further development of cooperation within teams working across borders. What needed to be done in order for cultural differences to be appreciated and used to the company's benefit?

Our cultural work relies on the following principles we consider to be very important:

- Placing things people have in common above their differences and understanding these differences as an opportunity and as a resource.
- Attention should revolve around finding solutions rather than on analyzing problems.

As a **preparation** for the workshop, all participants used an online assessment tool which required them to answer 108 questions. The analysis of these answers, including a variety of additional functionalities (e.g. comparison between one's own profile and that of someone in another country), will be available to all participants for a period of 12 months. This gave us the opportunity to prepare for personal questions and at the same time enabled us to create a group profile, which we subsequently used in the workshop.

At the **workshop**, we started with asking ourselves what culture means for every one of us and how different cultural dimensions become apparent to us. For that purpose, we relied on the above-mentioned tool, which combines Hofstede's five cultural dimensions (cf. Hofstede, Geert: "Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values") with the seven cultural dimensions introduced by Fons (cf. Charles Hampden-Turner, Fons Trompenaars: "Riding the waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business") to create a 10-dimensional model.

When comparing their own profiles to those of their learning partners, participants quickly engaged in one of many lively **feedback processes**: "What are our obvious points in common and our obvious differences and how do we experience them in our daily cooperation?" Looking through "intercultural spectacles" rewards us with a nuanced view of these differences.

This inevitably leads to the question of which aspects are inherent to one's personality and which aspects are a result of team culture and of organizational culture. The team's general profile is very helpful for elucidating certain aspects that are still unclear or otherwise ambiguous.

Here is the interesting **conclusion** we believe to be highly relevant for all organizations:

- The question of a person's cultural "fitting in" should be addressed as early as in the hiring phase for international positions.
- Teams including members of different countries need support when forming teams. When doing so, it should be taken into consideration that "cultural spectacles" are one of many differences.
- Notwithstanding the consideration for previously identified differences, attention should be focused on those resources that all team members have in common.
- Intercultural training goes way beyond mere language instruction or "how to act" workshops with universal application.

Feedback provided by our client, Mr. Wolfgang Braunboeck, Regional HR Manager Austria & South East Europe at Oracle Austria GmbH:

"This workshop was very interesting and revealing insofar as we found both common ground and differences within our group by using an intercultural approach.

Participants particularly appreciated the analyses provided as well as subsequent one-on-one feedback sessions. This workshop exceeded our expectations by far. Thanks again to the highly professional trainers for these two instructional and exciting workshop days."