Transferring Knowledge across Cultures:
A Learning Competencies Approach

Anna B. Kayes
D. Christopher Kayes
The George Washington University

Yoshitaka Yamazaki
International University of Japan

ABSTRACT

At the heart of any successful cross-cultural knowledge transfer effort lies an individual or group of individuals with the skills to manage a complex, ambiguous and often stressful process. The ability to manage the knowledge transfer process depends as much on learning in real time as it does on rational planning. Yet, few approaches to knowledge transfer have considered learning as a primary driver of success. In this article, we draw on new insights on how adults learn from experience in cross-cultural settings to understand the cross-cultural knowledge transfer process. We conceive cross-cultural knowledge transfer as a seven-stage process of learning and describe the essential competencies necessary for managing each of the seven stages. We draw on work with cross-cultural knowledge transfer efforts in a variety of industries and cultures to illustrate this process.

Cross-cultural Knowledge Transfer: An Issue of Learning

• A U.S. based automotive parts manufacturer wants to improve quality in a Chinese based supplier. The organization sends a team of engineers to transfer its local quality practices to a company in a remote province in China.

• A U.S. telecommunications firm expands its operations globally. A newly minted MBA from a top U.S. business school is charged with selecting and hiring personnel for its new operations.

• A Japanese consumer electronics manufacturer wants to introduce its team training program to a key U.S. based subsidiary. The project manager from the U.S. subsidiary leads an effort to transfer this training program in the U.S.

Each of these initiatives highlight that at the heart of successful cross-cultural knowledge transfer efforts lies an individual manager who translates innovation, ideas and leading edge processes from one context to another. Successful cross-cultural knowledge transfer (CCKT) requires a variety of considerations. Studies show that selection of the right managers (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997), ability of managers to adapt to a new host culture (Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000), the nature of
a particular management practice and its applicability to another culture and the nature of the host and home culture (Randolph, & Sashkin, 2002), all contribute to the success of a CCKT. Research on adult learning and competency development in concert with cross-cultural research reveals that at the core of successful transfer efforts lies an individual who successfully learns to navigate the knowledge transfer process (Kayes, Kayes & Yamazaki, forthcoming 2005; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Yet, most approaches to cross-cultural knowledge have only given tangential attention to the role of learning. Further, few approaches have identified the specific skills necessary for managing the knowledge transfer process. Learning, the translation of context specific experience into more generalized knowledge and back to context specific knowledge, lies at the core of effective CCKT.

This article provides a comprehensive model of cross-cultural knowledge transfer as a process of learning. By integrating recent developments in theory and the latest research in cross-cultural learning, we outline an essential set of core competencies necessary for the transfer of knowledge between cultures. Research shows that successful cross-cultural knowledge transfer lies in several factors:

1. An individual or group who manages the process
2. A specific set of learned competencies displayed by those individual or groups
3. A systematic cycle of learning before, during and after the process
4. A clear understanding of the limitations of knowledge transformation efforts reveals (Kayes, Kayes, & Yamazaki, 2005)

In this article we address each of these four factors and conclude with some general observations about the nature of knowledge transfer efforts across cultures. Specifically, we:

1. Describe the learning process and its application to CCKT
2. Present a list of seven cross-cultural competencies for managing the cross-cultural learning process
3. Describe cross-cultural knowledge transfer as a seven-stage process of learning
4. Identify the corresponding seven competencies necessary to manage each phase of the learning process

We illustrate both the seven-stage CCKT process and the associated competencies by describing the effort to transfer a successful team based learning program from a Japan based consumer electronics manufacturer to its U.S. subsidiary.

**Knowledge Transfer as Learning**

Literature on management and organizations has become rife with description of the global nature of organizations (Adler, 1997). With some degree of consensus, it has become clear that the essential competency for success in managing the global organization lies in learning (see Ferraro, 2002). Yet few have identified the specific competencies that managers need to transfer knowledge across global organizations. If organizations could gain a better understanding of the process of learning they could improve understanding of the cross-cultural knowledge transfer. After all, knowledge transfer, at its core
describes a process of how people learn through knowledge transformation (Nonaka, 1994).

To describe the learning process in more detail, we enlist experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning focuses on how individuals draw on direct experience with the world to solve problems, make sense of everyday events and create new knowledge. Experiential learning theory rests on a variety of assumptions about the nature of learning. Some of these assumptions include the idea that learning is a process, that learning results from an interchange between a person and their environment and that learning results in the creation of new knowledge.

There are several reasons why experiential learning provides a useful framework for understanding the process of knowledge transfer (Kolb & Kolb, 2002). First, the experiential approach provides a practical framework to describe a number of managerial concepts including strategy, job satisfaction, research and development activities as well as management and ethical development. Second, experiential learning describes a holistic process of learning, from the grounding of concrete experience to the abstract conceptualization of language and ideas. Third, the concise, yet sophisticated nature of the experiential learning model provides an effective framework to guide both the systematic training process as well as real time, on the job problem solving. Experiential learning has proven invaluable in efforts to develop essential competencies in individuals across the globe. Research supports the validation and reliability of the four factor model (Loo, 1999).

David Kolb’s well known four-stage model of experiential learning provides the basic structure of experiential learning. According to Kolb, learning involves a four-stage process of knowledge creation (Kayes, 2003).

**Gathering Knowledge**

Generating ideas involves recognizing new problems and opportunities, creating new possibilities and alternatives and identifying new knowledge. Skills associated with idea generation include taking leadership on issues, developing relationship with others and helping people. The Generating stage requires relating effectively to others and creating strong interpersonal relationships.

**Gathering Knowledge**

Gathering information involves making new observations on old knowledge, making sense of data in new ways, or identifying new applications for existing knowledge. Skills associated with information gathering include using emotions
effectively in the pursuit of new ideas (e.g., avoiding psychological resistance and fear), gathering data from innovative sources, and analyzing information in unique ways. The Gathering stage requires the ability to manage large amounts of information while suspending judgment about its usefulness.

**Organizing Knowledge**

Organizing involves creating conceptual models or plans, making ideas and concepts transferable to other contexts and creating frameworks for understanding complex knowledge. Organizing typically involves skills such as the use of technology or theory or placing complex information into a simplified framework. The Organizing stage requires the ability to synthesize complex ideas into transferable knowledge.

**Acting on Knowledge**

Taking action implies a degree of risk taking where unformulated ideas and their implications are tested out. Taking action requires focusing on outcomes, managing events as they unfold and dealing effectively with the unintended consequences of action. The Acting stage requires putting knowledge into a context where it can become a useful tool to solve the problems at hand.

Taken together, the four stages of generating, gathering, organizing and acting constitute a holistic process of knowledge creation. Experiential learning describes knowledge creation as a tension filled process of dealing with competing demands brought about by the dialectic nature of knowledge: generating versus organizing and gathering versus acting. Importantly, each stage of the learning cycle requires the use of skills and abilities that are diametrically opposed to others. For example, generating knowledge requires a person to be open to new experiences and engage directly with the world. On the other hand, organizing knowledge requires a person to be abstract, becoming detached from the minutia of everyday experience to create generalized knowledge. Similarly, gathering knowledge requires a person to reflect, demonstrate patience and observe the world around them in order to gather all relevant information. In contrast, acting on knowledge requires the ability to interact with others and test ideas uninhibited by the emergence of new knowledge.

**Recent Developments in Experiential Learning**

Growing interest in globalization and alternative forms of knowledge creation have created a growing interest in extending experiential learning to new applications and new ideas. One concern rests with the loss of meaning that occurs when knowledge is transferred from one person to another (Kayes, 2002; Nonaka, 1994). Countless studies of eyewitness testimony, perceptual studies and human memory report a consistent conclusion: It is very difficult, if not impossible, for two people to have exactly the same experience (Zsambok & Klein, 1997).

The loss of meaning may have special significance in knowledge transfer efforts, as meanings change when knowledge moves between and among cultures. In particular, as knowledge is integrated through
conversation, or language (Kolb, 1984; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Weick, 1969), ideas and practices that are salient in one culture become lost as they leave their original context and enter another. Awareness that the transfer of culture is a process of translation, and that translation necessitates fractured meaning provides an important addition to thinking about cross-cultural knowledge transfer because it highlights the importance of language in the knowledge transfer process. Akin to the loss of meaning that occurs when an experience is translated from one individual to another, CCKT efforts often strip local efforts of their intended meaning as knowledge becomes translated into another culture. The loss of meaning that occurs as information moves between cultures is highlighted in the limitations of the knowledge transfer process and should compel organizations involved in such efforts to ask:

1. What types of local practices can be translated into a new culture?
2. What aspects of local knowledge will translate well?
3. Which aspects of local knowledge will not translate well?
4. What are the implications of translating local knowledge into another culture?

That the loss of meaning that occurs became clear to us in one CCKT effort we heard about. In this example, a U.S. based organization had successfully redesigned their compensation incentive programs for their consultants. They transitioned from only offering individual performance incentive plans, to offering a combination of individual and team-based incentive programs.

Because this incentive effort was met with so much excitement and success in the U.S. branches, they carried the concept to their European satellite offices. The Human Resources director responsible for translating this program into the European market was baffled by the unintended consequences that emerged. What had been a successful program in the U.S. offices was met with skepticism in the European implementation of the program. It was six months after the program implementation that the U.S. director discovered that what was supposed to be an incentive reward program had been executed and managed as a reward and discipline program. In other words, the European counterparts were utilizing the reward system to determine who they would transfer, terminate or demote. European consultants were very resentful of this program because they equated it with punitive measures.

In the next section, we enlist experiential learning theory and the
possible loss of meanings that occur during cross-cultural knowledge transfer efforts to look at the specific competencies involved in the cross-cultural learning.

**The Seven Competencies of Cross-Cultural Learning**

With experiential learning as a guide, we directed our efforts to reviewing the diverse research findings on the skills, abilities or knowledge related to successful cross-cultural management. We asked the question: What makes a manager successful in another culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004)? In other words, we were interested in finding out how managers, who most often learned to be effective in their home culture, learned to be effective in another, or host culture. We reviewed nearly a hundred different studies that contained thousands of interviews or surveys with expatriates. Although a large number of the studies looked at how Westerners learned to adapt to non-western work contexts, our review contained extensive data from a variety of cultures and managerial levels. The diversity of the studies made us confident that our findings would help us identify general cross-cultural learning competencies. After we identified about 40 different competencies, we asked a number of experts to sort the competencies into seven categories. We then arrived at seven cross-cultural learning competencies and describe each in detail below (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

**Cross-cultural Learning Competencies**

1. **Valuing different cultures.** Successful cross-cultural learning requires an appreciation for the host culture. Successful expatriates demonstrate a genuine respect for the new host culture. They take an appreciative approach to their host culture and view themselves as guests in the host country. Additionally, successful expatriates demonstrate a natural curiosity in the host culture’s customs, beliefs and history. This includes learning the host cultures customs and to some degree ‘assimilating’ or taking on the characteristics of the host culture.

2. **Building relationships in the host culture.** Successful expatriates interact with others in the host culture regularly, and when misunderstandings arose, they learn to maintain contact with those in the culture despite difficulties. Successful managers build relationships with locals and others who are part of the host culture. Such relationships require individuals to move beyond the communities of expatriates from their country of origin and become ingrained in the host culture. These interactions with the host country create interactions and close friendships with the host culture.

3. **Listening and observing.** Successful expatriates develop an ability to learn new things from the host culture. They develop an understanding of how the host culture works and more importantly why certain customs, which may have seemed strange at first, are important to the particular culture. Successful managers learn to understand local issues by listening and observing. By listening and observing, those involved in CCKT efforts are able to develop a deeper understanding of cultural patterns as well as the underlying reasons for these patterns. It is not uncommon for successful managers to
continually ask questions to clarify and get more information.

4. Coping with ambiguity. Successful cross-cultural learning requires the ability to deal with the inevitable ambiguity and lack of clarity that comes with working in a foreign culture. Expatriates express effectiveness in understanding the various non-verbal cues and underlying circumstances inherent in the local culture. Successful expatriates learn to cope with the lack of clarity around certain cultural interactions. Working in another culture means accepting the fact that one never quite knows if he or she has followed the right custom, said the right thing, or responded in the appropriate manner.

5. Translating complex ideas. The ability to translate ideas into another culture lies at the heart of effective cross-cultural learning. For most leaders, this usually means taking ideas from the host culture and translating these ideas back into their home culture. Such translation meant learning is to make sense of important ideas, discard minor issues and translate complex information. The translations include transferring from host language back into home language or from the home language back into host language.

6. Taking action. The ability to deal with ambiguity brought about through cross-cultural interaction becomes essential for taking action. Even when the implications, details or cross-cultural applicability of knowledge transfer remain unclear, successful cross-learning requires taking action, despite the requisite lack of clarity around potential outcomes. Successful expatriate learning involves appreciating differences between host and home culture, but also knowing when to move a project forward, despite these differences.

7. Managing others. Like any learning process, cross-cultural learning requires enlisting others and gaining support for a project. Successful expatriates realize that teamwork and enlisting the support of others was essential. Expatriates involve others, manage progress, and monitor implications. Like their culturally confined colleagues, expatriate learning involves helping others accomplish a task and including others as part of the team.

These seven cross-cultural competencies and their relationship to the four-stage cycle of experiential learning are displayed in Figure 1. Further research is needed to understand the applications of these seven skills in particular cultures. However, this general typology provided only the starting point to our understanding of the knowledge transfer process.

Knowledge Transfer as Cross-Cultural Learning

Our extensive review of the literature on cross-cultural learning revealed interesting results that have informed our research and have supplied us with a comprehensive model to guide the development of cross-cultural managerial skills. We wanted to go a step further in understanding the process of learning and how these competencies impact the transfer of knowledge across cultures. The seven cross-cultural competencies in conjunction with the four-stage process of learning allowed us to understand the nature of cross-cultural learning, not just as an isolated competency, but as a process of learning between a home and host culture (Boyatzis, 1982).
An Experiential Learning Approach to cross-cultural knowledge transfer is depicted in Figure 2. The model demonstrates the seven stages of knowledge creation that correspond to the four stages of learning and the seven learning competencies. The process demonstrates how different kinds of knowledge creation strategies are essential for transforming knowledge between a host and home culture. The idea of knowledge fracturing is captured as knowledge that flows between host and home culture.

**Seven Stages of Cross-cultural Knowledge Transfer**

1. **Valuing another culture.** Knowledge transfer begins with valuing the knowledge of another culture as a potential ground for learning. Valuing another culture requires being open to different approaches or ideas and their potential for transfer. As part of the generating stage of knowledge creation, valuing another culture means being open to innovative practices, ideas and know-how. The ability to generate knowledge arises from an appreciation of another culture. Key skills for successful navigation of this stage include being open minded to the potential of another culture, being sensitive, and being appreciative.

2. **Identifying local knowledge.** Intelligence gathering organizations have known this for years: gathering relevant, timely and reliable knowledge begins at the local level. Published reports or other forms of
public knowledge are often already too generalized to be of use. The kind of knowledge that can be obtained from junkets and fact finding missions often lack depth unless understood in its local context. As part of the knowledge generating stage of knowledge creation, identifying local knowledge includes skills such as relating to others who are different and being patient in the face of potential misunderstandings.

3. **Listening and observing.** Once an opportunity for knowledge has been identified, details become the next order of learning. Successful application of knowledge first requires that it be understood, to the best degree possible, in its local context. As part of the gathering stage of knowledge creation, listening and observation focus on gathering as much information as possible without making judgments regarding its immediate relevancy. Judgments on which details should be included in transfer can be saved for later. The essential skills required in this phase include patience, withholding judgment and detail orientation.
4. **Coping with ambiguity.** Once knowledge has been identified for the knowledge transfer process it often includes details or implications that make it effective in one culture. These same details may be inappropriate for other cultures. As a mixture of gathering and organizing processes of learning, coping with ambiguity requires identifying and selecting important data despite its ambiguity, and the ability to organize existing knowledge into frameworks that make it more accessible to translation.

5. **Translating knowledge.** Once all relevant information has been obtained, translating an idea into another culture requires understanding the nature of language in context. Translation from one culture to another suggests that knowledge transfer is a language based process and cross-cultural knowledge transfer is as much about translating through language as it is about culture. Translating describes the process by which knowledge becomes fractured. Recognition of the fractured, or subjective transition that occurs during the knowledge transfer process is important because it allows the manager to understand the adaptability of the process (Delong & Fahey, 2000).

6. **Managing unintended consequences.** Successful knowledge creation efforts aren’t finished with the introduction of an idea. The process must be actively managed. Often times, knowledge becomes stripped of its underlying values when it translates into another culture resulting in knowledge that may be technically appropriate but culturally void. Knowledge no longer remains an abstract idea, but a concrete part of organizational life. The transfer begins to take on a life of its own. This stage of the knowledge transfer process is crucial because it implicates an idea back into a local culture, albeit one significantly different from its origins. Essential skills for managing objections include awareness of the practical implications of an idea, and the ability to enlist the support of others, despite their doubts.

7. **Institutionalizing.** Once new knowledge successfully transfers into a new culture, it is not likely to stay unless the knowledge is institutionalized in the actions, words and budgets of the organization. Institutionalizing means that the cycle of learning will repeat itself time and time again as the organization changes and adapts. Institutionalization ensures that knowledge will survive minor and sometimes major organizational change.

**An Example of Learning across Cultures: Team Continuity Training**

We drew on data from multinational corporations to identify a specific example of CCKT. One CCKT effort was particularly illustrative of our model. The transfer effort took place between a Japanese consumer electronics manufacturer located in Japan and one of its U.S. subsidiaries. The effort was appealing to us because it focused on a multi-dimensional training effort involving interpersonal, technical and team training. This example illustrated team learning (e.g., Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005) and how it applies in a cross-cultural context. The Japanese effort was loosely translated into English as **Team Continuity Training**. The intent of the training was to improve efficiency and increase standardiza-
tion in the production process. The effort to transfer this successful program in the U.S. was spearheaded by a U.S. human resources professional who was designated as the project manager for the effort. This example demonstrates how seven distinct learning stages help organize an otherwise chaotic CCKT process.

1. Valuing another culture.

The Team Continuity Training Project Manager became aware that the overall performance of the teams in the Japanese facilities was strong in terms of production and quality outputs due to the team continuity training program that had been instituted in the organization. One reason the training was so successful was that it integrated complex industrial engineering processes such as space reduction, time and motion improvements, process flow improvements, and manufacturing cell operations with interpersonal communication skills. An important aspect of the Japanese team continuity training was an intense physical component that emphasized team cohesion.

2. Building relationships with locals.

It became customary for the team project manager to participate in the team training on his frequent visits to Japan. Additionally, the project manager often engaged in social occasions to interact with local plant officials. The sharing of ideas and information occurred both on and off work in formal and informal settings. This informal interaction occurred even though the communication required a translator.

3. Coping with ambiguity.

The project manager became fixated on one aspect of the team continuity training involving a physical component. This involved the team members sitting and standing in unison at the direction of an instructor. The end of the day culminated with every team member being blindfolded as the team was able to successfully sit and stand as directed by the instructor in unison. By the end of the day, after many hours of this same routine, the project manager found himself frustrated with the repetition of the activity, yet excited by the possibility of it transforming a group of individuals to work in unison as a team. At this point, the project manager was struggling with how to combine all three components of the knowledge transfer efforts together into a comprehensive training program in the U.S.

4. Listening and observing.

The project manager knew that collectively oriented activities work
well in Japan but may not translate well into the U.S. In addition, the physical nature of the activities work to create cohesion and a sense of collectivity that seemed strange to the program manager who came from an individualistic culture like the U.S.

5. Translating knowledge.

Bringing back the idea led to some interesting results. In addition to the industrial engineering component, the project manager tried to translate the physical component of team continuity training (which at this point was now being called Team Building). The physical component included having an agile and physical manager lead a group of employees through an extreme ‘power walk’ around the plant grounds. During the power walk, the teams yelled their newly created team slogan. In addition, the U.S. subsidiary opted not to include the interpersonal training component of the original training because it appeared to be redundant with training already provided in the organization.


The project manager failed to consider the physical component of this training. In the original design of the training the physical limitations of employees were considered (sitting in chairs and standing in one place). Such limitations were not taken into consideration when the process was translated into the US. Instead of culminating in a cohesive team, the result was a group of sweating, angry, hoarse employees. Despite success in improving team cohesion, the physical component also created some unintended consequences: employees who were angry at the organization. To manage this anger, the project manager created a public awards ceremony to recognize the efforts of the teams who went through the team building training.

7. Institutionalizing.

While the physical march through the organization’s grounds did not survive its trial period, the training and the awards ceremony continue to be held every year as teams continue to cycle through the training.

In the following section, we outline general lessons learned from our research and practice including the nature of CCKT, the role of language and the attainment of skills related to CCKT.

Learning Across Cultures
The Process Nature of Learning

The model we propose is a greatly simplified one. In reality each of the seven stages of knowledge transfer reflects ongoing processes and the cycle repeats itself many times. Being able to identify which stage of learning and which subsequent set of skills are needed is the first step towards improving the effectiveness of cross-cultural knowledge transfer. The knowledge transfer process requires multiple repeated cycles that don’t always follow the idealistic sequence we have suggested. Making judgments about which steps deserve the most attention, which steps the least, and which steps are likely to cause the most problems require attention.

The ability to identify the process nature of the knowledge transfer process as well as the ability to identify which stage of the cycle in which an effort is most likely contained pro-
vides a way to create order out of the naturally disorderly process of cross-cultural knowledge transfer.

**Cross-Cultural Competence**

Once the particular stage of the learning cycle has been identified, the individual can work towards identifying or matching the appropriate skill necessary to manage the process. Enlisting others and identifying ways to obtain the skills necessary for managing different stages of the process may be the linchpin of success in knowledge transfer. Since effective management of the process entails obtaining a diverse, even diametrically opposed set of skills, it is unlikely that all managers will be able to manage the complexity alone without learning during the process itself.

**Developing Cross-cultural Skills**

Executives, managers and others in organizations can look many places to develop these skills. As we have discussed, learning how to transfer knowledge across cultures is a dynamic process, often learned on the job and in the context of at least two cultures (host and home). A three phase process of learning may be most appropriate. First, people work towards identifying and developing general cross cultural competencies as a first step, the next step is to understand the nature of a specific culture and the specific demands, customs and conventions of each culture. Finally, individuals can work to develop the more complex and difficult Adaptive competencies (Kolb, 1984).

Effective CCKT efforts require continual learning. Learning to manage the CCKT process requires a variety of skills that will likely be learned from direct experience itself. By viewing the process of knowledge transfer as a four-stage cycle of learning, those involved in CCKT efforts can both ensure the success of knowledge transfer efforts as well as enhance skills necessary for successful expatriation. Giving attention to generating, gathering, organizing and acting provide a comprehensive approach to knowledge transfer. In the end, successful CCKT efforts will result not from the idea itself, but from skill in managing the process itself.

**References**


**ANNA B. KAYES** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Human Resource Management at The George Washington University, School of Business. She received a doctorate in education from The George Washington University in Human and Organizational Studies. Her research focuses on power and trust dynamics and how people learn from experience. She has over ten years of experience consulting in human resources. Her research has appeared in *Journal of Management Education* and *Journal of Managerial Psychology*.

**D. CHRISTOPHER KAYES** is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at The George Washington University, School of Business. He received his Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University in Organizational Behavior. His research focuses on how experience is transformed into organizational knowledge, and has appeared in journals such as *Human Relations, Academy of Management Learning and Development,* and *Organizational Dynamics.*

**YOSHITAKA YAMAZAKI** holds a Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University and is an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at International University of Japan. His current research interests include cross-cultural learning and adaptation, competent managers in multinational corporations, and effective learning environments of cross-cultural institutions.