Activity 9.9
THE CULTURE ASSIMILATOR

The *culture assimilator* (also called the intercultural sensitizer) is one of the most popular methods of intercultural training. It uses a series of scenarios, or *critical incidents*, that involve some sort of culture clash or misunderstanding to prepare people for interacting effectively with culturally different others. The trainee is asked to read the incident and then select the best one of several attributions (explanations) for the incident. The trainee then receives feedback on the appropriateness of his or her choice. The reasoning behind the culture assimilator is that through repeated exposure to the critical incidents, the trainee will learn to make attributions similar to those made by members of the culture involved (Paige, 2004). The purpose of this activity is to explore the culture assimilator method of intercultural training by writing an assimilator item of your own.

**Directions:** Read the sample assimilator item below. Please note that it consists of a scenario, four possible responses, and rationales for each response. One you have read the sample item, follow the steps outlined to develop your own assimilator item.

**Sample Assimilator Item** (Tolbert & McLean, 1995)

A U.S. negotiation firm assigned Paul, a top negotiator, to buy raw materials from Venezuela. Paul had been abroad for several years in other Latin American countries, so he knew both formal and street Spanish. During some of the negotiations with the Venezuelan firm, Paul brought the presentation down to an informal level of speech. He noticed that the Venezuelans were listening attentively and seemed to follow the ideas and business plan he presented. He was joking around and talking like "one of the boys" since he was confident about the Latin business atmosphere. The Venezuelans listened politely until the end of the presentation. When Paul was finished, they thanked him and he left.

A week later Paul's manager called him into his office. He began by complimenting Paul on his negotiations record. Paul told him how wonderful the trip to Venezuela was and that he was anxious to hear what had happened. The manager then told Paul that he was about to ask him the same thing -- what had happened? The Venezuelan firm called his company and refused to do business with them in the future. Paul was very upset and had no idea what had happened.

Why did the negotiations between Paul and the Venezuelan firm not produce the results he expected?

**Responses:**

a. Paul should not have taken the initiative in changing the atmosphere and the relationship with the Venezuelans to an informal level. He should have respected the tone set by the Venezuelans. Because of his actions, he
was perceived as condescending.

b. Paul's company made the unfortunate assumption that Paul was qualified to enter the Venezuelan culture successfully because of his prior experience in Latin America. Paul relied too heavily on his presumed understanding of the culture. He assumed that all Latin American countries were the same, and he was too informal for the Venezuelan culture.

c. By dropping to an informal level so quickly, Paul created doubt in the minds of the Venezuelans as to the seriousness of the proposal and his company. In Venezuela, a company's approach is a very important part of maintaining its reputation.

d. The company was not ready to make a decision yet. The Venezuelans needed to call more meetings with Paul and get to know him, perhaps over lunches or dinners. The deal needed to be discussed more.

Rationales:

1. You selected a. When looking at this situation from a U.S. perspective, it is a reasonable response. However, being informal is not necessarily the same as being condescending. While Paul should have respected the tone set by the Venezuelans, there is a more plausible response to this scenario. Please choose again.

2. You selected b. This is a good choice. Some Latin American countries do encourage informal business relationships, but that is not the case in Venezuela. Paul should have explored the Venezuelan norms of business relationships before acting in a more informal manner. It is dangerous to assume commonalities in values, beliefs, and practices within countries that merely share a common language. There is another choice, however, that was preferred by Venezuelans. Please choose again.

3. You selected c. This is the choice chosen most often by Venezuelans. Venezuelans prefer a formal to semiformal work environment and mode of communication. Breaking that norm created doubt in the Venezuelans' minds as to how professional and credible Paul and his company were. In Venezuela, a company's credibility is often determined by its approach to business. The business approach is a very important part of establishing and maintaining one's reputation.
4. You selected d. Perhaps the company may not have been ready to make a decision yet. However, the actual response of the Venezuelans was to threaten not to do business in the future with the company, which is a stronger message than simply saying that they are not ready to make a decision. Such a dramatic response is more indicative of an error of something that he did rather than something that he failed to do. Please choose again.

**Procedure for developing your assimilator item:**

1. *Choose a culture or social group* that you are familiar with or would like to learn more about.

2. *Choose an issue* that you would like to teach others about through your assimilator item. This issue should involve some type of misunderstanding due to culture, gender, or other social group membership.

3. *Write your scenario* using information gleaned from personal experiences, the experiences of others with intercultural experience, observations you have made about intercultural interactions, or reading you have done about culture and human behavior.

4. *Provide four possible responses* to use in your assimilator item. One response should provide a culturally accurate explanation for the incident. Write three additional explanations that, although believable to a cultural outsider, do not adequately explain the incident.

5. *Provide a separate rationale for each response* explaining why it is -- or is not -- the best explanation for the incident.
Chapter 9

Your critical incident:

Responses:
Rationales:

Source:

Reference: