



Internship at the GTZ on „Improving Cross Cultural Communication in Vietnam“

Final Report

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I. INTERNSHIP OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

In preparation contacts were made whilst still in Germany to DSE, IFIM, CDC and University of Regensburg –Institute for Cross Cultural Psychology. Supported by the DSE the intern had the chance to take part in the DSE training for cross cultural co-operation/ Asia.

In order to get to grips with the subject of the internship and to provide an overview how other German organisations proceed with cross cultural preparation and coaching, the internship was begun in Hanoi with eleven talks with representatives of other German organisations: DAAD, DED, German Embassy, Political Foundations, Goethe Institut and CIM.

During an AMA meeting the intern gave a short presentation of the objective and content of her internship. Interviews with all AMAs, their partners and counterparts followed. Altogether 25 GTZ AMAs and 10 Vietnamese partners and counterparts were interviewed in Ha Noi and in Ha Tinh.

The objective of the internship was to create a series of events for „Improving of Cross Cultural Communication in Vietnam”. Therefore a network of resource persons for lectures, training and cultural events in Ha Noi and Germany was built up. This network consists of 17 connections to DSE tutors for Vietnam, to a distributor for Vietnamese films and to foreign and Vietnamese researchers concerned with Vietnam and cross cultural communication.

The first evening of the series „Improving Cross Cultural Communication in Vietnam“ concluded the internship. The intern presented the results of her internship on this evening and the film „A dream in Hanoi“, which illustrates typical misunderstandings in American-Vietnamese communication, was shown.

I. OUTCOME OF THE INTERVIEWS

This report is based on the interns presentation for the first evening of the series „Improving Cross Cultural Communication in Vietnam“ on the 4th June 2002. Quotations are given in paragraphs, those of Germans *in italics* and those of Vietnamese in Garamond.

1. WARMING UP

On average GTZ AMAs had already been living in Vietnam for 2,5 years. However, the duration of their stay is widely spread between 8 and half a year.

Most of the employees speak some words of Vietnamese. Learning Vietnamese is considered to be very difficult. Resulting constraints in communication are often perceived as a „*big barrier*“. *“I can’t even go for a quiet beer with my partner.”* Nevertheless some employees speak Vietnamese fluently.

The reason for moving to Vietnam is professional for most of the GTZ employees. However some of them have been interested in Vietnam for a long time: They mentioned the political past, the communist structures, and the beautiful landscape.

A lot of AMAs find it difficult to build up personal relations with Vietnamese:

„Coming into personal contact with Vietnamese is not very easy, because officials are not allowed to have any kind of contact to foreigners and checked up on this. So they are in an ambiguous situation and are not free in their decision to act. In this way distance is created.“ *„In the*

provinces people who have contact with foreigners have a bad reputation. That is why it is hardly possible to integrate.”

„Contacts are not personal, but collegial. When I am with Vietnamese colleagues I feel constant suspicion and jealousy. They always criticising someone, that gets on my nerves!“

„Here I do not get the feeling of belonging in contrast to my experience in Africa.“

„The people here are so much looking for material advantage. They are so materialistic.“

„Vietnamese are very self confident, stubborn and obstinate. Here you can't count on being admired just because of being a foreigner like in other countries.“, „Being a foreigner here doesn't mean you are treated distinctively, here you have to prove yourself as an individual.“

„Communication with the outside is slight. It is hard to find common ground with Vietnamese. Differences –among them the financial background– are too big.“

Social contacts can help to better understand the differences between the German and the Vietnamese cultures and social network can provide useful support. This can even be important for professional objectives, because *„social contacts are like a screen [screen is also a Vietnamese metaphor for relations]. You will be fine as long as your screen is working. Without screen a lot of things don't work.“*

The extent of contact to locals is often taken to measure cross cultural competence in cross cultural psychology. That's the reason behind the question about personal contacts to Vietnamese in the interviews with the AMAs.

2. FOUR THESES

2.1. Confidence is the Key

„In Vietnam you can buy everything, but confidence.“

The Relationship between Confidence and Information

In the opinion of many GTZ AMAs, effective co-operation is often affected of Vietnamese holding back information. *„They have a problem with communication and information here. They are not used to communicate with each other.“*, *„Here information means power. And power is not easily shared.“* Thus even Vietnamese among themselves seem to have different strategies to handling information.

Vietnamese express their opinion:

„Here we are not used to a regular exchange of information. Germans can face this by working closely with Vietnamese, building up personal relations. In this case, Vietnamese are more likely to change their attitude.“

„In a meeting with Vietnamese you do not have to come straight to the point, to the reason for the meeting. Otherwise the Vietnamese will think: He only uses me to get information, he exploits me, he is heartless.“

Only in a relationship of trust do Vietnamese seem to be willing to share information. And only a relationship of trust enables them to adjust their usual way of handling information.

Advantages and Disadvantages of being Part of the In-group

Once a relationship of trust to the partner is built up you get access to the Vietnamese networks and you are increasingly part of the Vietnamese in-group. This entails advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- Smoother information is exchanged.
- Gaining an overview of Vietnamese working methods enables points of intervention to be identified.
- The ability to judge projects realistically and see which plan will be fulfilled in the future and which not.

Disadvantages

- Increased difficulty of remaining independent in financial questions.
- The Vietnamese do not know much about the concept of delegation. Therefore extraordinarily detailed instructions are expected of the director, who is overworked as a result.
- As appointments and planning are foreign to Vietnamese structures, things are very often done only at the last minute. But with the help of Vietnamese networks, it is relatively easy to cope with the resulting stress.

Definition of a “Relationship of Trust“

When asked for a definition of a relationship of trust, Vietnamese answer:

„If you talk about your families, you have a relationship of trust.“

„In relationship of trust each is always there for each other.“

„Trust develops by sharing your daily life, by sharing experiences, by understanding each other. Then you are also sharing knowledge and information.“

„At first Vietnamese are open and helpful. You will feel the core of the problem only later, when trying to build up trust. Showing interest in private things develops trust. Germans do not manage to build up trust at the highest political levels.“

„If people are constantly coming and going in an office, this office belongs to a Vietnamese network.“, „Vietnamese offices don’t have a waiting room.“

„Putting yourself in a Vietnamese place, thinking as they would, build up trust.“

„In the beginning it is important to build up good contact to the Vietnamese staff. Maybe that means losing time in the beginning, but in this way you are going to save it later.“

„If somebody is working not only for his own profit, but for the wealth of Vietnam, he will have a big advantage in building up trust.“

„If Vietnamese see your commitment for the project, for the task, they will reward this with information.“

One AMA comments on the importance of trust:

„The most important thing in Vietnam is a basic of trust. If you have created this, it is also possible to show emotions, to get loud. With a basic of trust that doesn’t mean a break in the relationship.“

Another AMA points out the most important requirements for a working relationship of trust:

„Staying in town for Tet and visiting influential people. Talking about your own family and that of the partner and having a strong liver for the drinking games.“

For a Vietnamese this is quiet similar: „In a relationship of trust you have to combine liquor and work.“

Summary

What was said concerning building up trust can be summed up in four statements:

- 1) Stress the personal level
- 2) Put yourself in the partners place
- 3) Show patience
- 4) Show a commitment in the good of Vietnam

All those Vietnamese interviewed agreed that without trust an efficient working relationship is impossible. That means: With the trust of your partners time can be saved, influence can be gained through access to networks and finally money can be saved by being able to work more efficiently and because projects fail less often. Only with the trust of the partners is the sustainability of projects certain and only with trust can one really reach the Vietnamese and ensure that knowledge and change are accepted and understood.

„In the beginning you need a lot of time to just sit and talk. That is very important, the outcome depends on it. If the beginning was good, it will work later on, because then Vietnamese are very goal oriented.“

„Cross Cultural communication is a very sensitive subject in Vietnam. Yet if the trust of the partners can be built up, outstanding results can be achieved.“

2.2. Is Adaptation Necessary?

Not Adaptation but Understanding

In the interviews the subject of adaptation was often mentioned by the AMAs. A lot of GTZ employees seem to feel under pressure to adapt more than they want to. Interestingly Vietnamese on the other hand agreed in emphasising that they do not want Germans to adapt but instead want to be **understood** by the Germans.

„Germans think they have to adapt here. That’s not right! They should try to understand the Vietnamese, to be curious.“

„Vietnamese want to be understood. When they feel they are understood, they also gladly accept advice.“

„No respect without understanding.“

„It’s about coming together and not assimilation.“

Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures

The Vietnamese wish to be understood, which has been mentioned so often, shows a basic difference between German and Vietnamese styles of communication. In Vietnam it is more common than in Germany to think and act sympathetically, trying to put oneself in the partner’s place. A Vietnamese expressed it thus: „Vietnamese don’t ask: How can I achieve the goal? but: How can I achieve the goal together with my colleagues?. These two logics complement each other.“

The concept of collectivistic and individualistic cultures in cross cultural psychology offers a way of illustrating these differences in detail. Vietnam is classed in the literature as a collectivistic culture and Germany as an individualistic culture.

Collectivism	Individualism
Focus On the group	Focus On the individual
Act sympathetically	Prove independence
Put oneself in the partner's place	Express own objectives
Understand the partner	Explain oneself

Values in Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures

This concept can explain components of cultural behaviour, like here the Vietnamese view of “understanding”. It is not sufficient to explain the whole behaviour of one culture. Hofstede also used this concept in his study, in which he investigated the behaviour of managers in 40 countries. But in his study he used it as one index of four: as the index of individualism. The three others are: Index of masculinity, index of power distance and index of avoidance of insecurity. Unfortunately Hofstedes research does not provide results especially for Vietnam.

In Vietnam it is common to put oneself in the partner's place, whereas in Germany one is likely to express one's own opinion. Consequently the Vietnamese do not feel understood by Germans very often. In the interviews this was mentioned frequently by the Vietnamese. That can even lead to Germans being perceived as arrogant: „Germans think more in terms of Vietnamese being deficient instead of terms of cross cultural understanding.” AMAs themselves said: *„We often have a know-it-all mentality and are quick to point out the finger. We often are very obstinate only seeing our technical superiority and trying to push our objectives without the agreement of the Vietnamese.”*

The Vietnamese focus on social relationships affects Germans on the other hand, too: Sometimes they fell that Vietnamese come too close disturbing their privacy or they even feel like they are being patronised.

Finally it has to be stressed that Vietnamese have to make much more of an effort to understand western people than the other way round, because of the political and economical situation. For example it is most often the

Vietnamese who speak the foreign language, learn about western thinking and way of working etc.

„We are living in a situation of transition anyway. In a few years many more Vietnamese are going to speak foreign languages, are going to understand western thinking and capitalistic procedures. Then fewer cross cultural misunderstandings are going to occur, because Vietnamese are going to have adapted much more.“

Summary

Probably Vietnamese expect much less adaptation than Germans assume. They want rapprochement through reciprocal understanding, they do not want the Germans to become Vietnamese. A Vietnamese proverb goes to the heart of the matter: “Hoa nhap nhung khong hoa tan!” [Integration but not assimilation!]

„Vietnamese do not want the Germans to be too close to them. Sometimes it quiet suits them if nobody understands Vietnamese.“

2.3. Cross Cultural or Structural Differences?

Without doubt there are huge differences between the GTZ AMAs and their Vietnamese counterparts. But these differences cannot be explained only by stressing cross cultural differences such as different values, behaviours and thinking. Germans and Vietnamese are rather integrated in different structures, which grant different scopes for action and set different limits.

GTZ AMA	Vietnamese counterpart
Dependent on German expatriate structures and on assistance of Vietnamese	Integrated in structures of loyalty
Wide freedom as regards work content	Narrow limits to creativity and decision making
Bound by GTZ regulations	Bound by Vietnamese explicit and implicit regulations

Structural differences GTZ AMA – Vietnamese counterpart

Integration in Different Structures

GTZ AMAs in Vietnam are living in a network of other expatriates and for contact to Vietnamese they have to rely on English or German speaking Vietnamese or on their translator. *„We are living in a dome and our translator is the gate to the world.“* Germans are constantly dependent on the support of Vietnamese, who do not always seem to be aware about that. *„Vietnamese often don't recognise that it is their responsibility to make life in Vietnam easy for the expert, although this is so important!“*

On the other hand, Vietnamese are bound to social structures which mean a lot of obligations for them. Particularly employees in foreign countries do not have these structures, in Germany they also would be confronted with them rather. *„Germans don't see which obligations arising from social networks we have to comply with.“*

Different Freedom as regards Content of work

Germans who need not answer to a superior as regards content of their work have got a different formal freedom than Vietnamese bound in a Confucian – communistic system.

„In Vietnam commitment and initiative of one's own is suppressed constantly by the authoritative structures.“

„Vietnamese on their own work very well. It is the systems which brings them down.“

„The core problem is, that jobs are not allocated according to qualifications, but by having connections and paying. That’s why the best and most motivated do not always fill the position.“

Different Regulations

In comparison to German structures there are many more implicit regulations in Vietnamese structures, that means unwritten rules: *„They have no culture of discussion here, no conferences, no written overview of the organisation, no electronic storage of collected knowledge.“* GTZ AMAs again come upon the problem of sufficient information here (see above).

On the other hand Vietnamese do not know sufficiently the GTZ regulations and misjudge the scope of action of AMAs:

„For me it was very important to read the GTZ regulations! Since that point I could better understand my German counterpart. I even distributed the regulations to my colleagues.“

„From the beginning you have to make clear to your partner that you are open in professional questions, but that the German instruments of co-operation are fixed. The available budget has to be made clear and it has to be emphasised that no additional financial help can be granted.“

„German co-operation in development doesn’t have money. That creates a bad climate.“

„Germans have strict and detailed regulations. But how they are converted depends on those responsible.“

Vietnamese as much as Germans stress that particularly in the beginning it is important to have clear common objectives and co-ordinate expectations, maybe even in a workshop of several days.

Summary

GTZ AMAs and Vietnamese counterpart are bound to different structures. Thus an unequal relationship emerges, which impedes mutual understanding.

As one AMA and a Vietnamese woman see it:

„The structure of incentives and motivation of a Vietnamese counterpart is contrary to those of an AMA. Just imagine: Take a highly motivated, extraordinary well remunerated Vietnamese and put him in a German official structure. He would be just the same as the AMAs here! It is idealistic and not realistic to think we have the same objectives. We don't even have the same basic conditions.“

„The problem in relations here is, that they are very unequal. The Vietnamese official has too much demands on his time, is confronted with exhausting decision-making procedures and is earning much less than the German, who can work much more on his own initiative.“

2.4. Is change possible?

„Here you have to be highly qualified to be respected by the Vietnamese. But you also need to have a feel for the Vietnamese. Having strong cross cultural skills can mobilises much resources.“

To achieve something in Vietnam it is apparently not sufficient to be a very well qualified specialist but cross cultural sensitivity is also required to facilitate a trusting and workable relationship with Vietnamese.

„Our projects don't get into difficulty due to economic problems, but due to problems in personal relations with our counterparts.“

Creating a climate of trust is the basic of each further step taken in a project. In addition the interviews revealed five further points to ease the process of change in Vietnam.

1) Make Arrangements

As Germans do not always comprehend how procedures in Vietnam function, close contact to Vietnamese colleagues and constant consultations with them can prevent misjudgements. When questioned on this topic, Vietnamese and Germans agree:

„You should never draw a conclusion without asking a local about it. And you should not overestimate yourself because of professional superiority. In

Vietnam everything is different, that's why you need good Vietnamese colleagues.“

„Go-betweens are absolutely necessary, to check one's own estimation and to recognise as many factors as possible.“

„Before doing anything it is important to ask the Vietnamese partners for advice. That's why the contact to them is so important!“

In any case the project with its AMAs and its Vietnamese is a forum of mutual exchange of views and influence: *„Little things like being close to the people in the project already achieves something!“*

2) Find consensus

In a relationship of trust, one is more likely to be able to convince a partner than have to instruct them: *“It is important to build up teams, find a consensus, they don't want big advisors.“* As it is mentioned often in the context of Asian cultures, Vietnamese are used to taking decisions by a consensus. In turn, these decisions will affect Vietnamese thinking and Vietnamese structures. Only in this way will decisions have influence and sustain effect.

„You should not force Vietnamese to decisions, otherwise there will be no ownership.“

Participation has to be taken much more seriously as a guide for the AMA as well as on the level of GTZ procedures:

„Participation is not taken as seriously as it is written on the paper.“

„Projects move forward slowly, because Vietnamese leave Germans a lot of leeway. Equality is missing.“

Throwing one's weight about and forcing Vietnamese into decisions is only successful in the short term - in the best case scenario: *„You can shove us around, that'll even work, but only once!“*

In case one is frustrated by the non-constructive behaviour of a Vietnamese, a Vietnamese advises: *„Thinking about Vietnamese you should ask yourself: Why is he doing that? And you should assume that they also want the best for their country.“*

3) Show patience

Vietnamese have a different understanding of time. Vietnamese as well as Germans repeated in the interviews that between six month to one year is required to settle down in Vietnam. In this time not much should be decided, but observed. *„The first one year stay in the background, watch and collect impressions!“*

In general Vietnamese pace of work demands a great deal of time and Vietnamese give preference to slow, long-term procedures.

„We have to learn from the Vietnamese: One step forwards and two back.“

„Plan change in small steps. One step after the other.“

„In Vietnam it is difficult to move somebody to a spontaneous change of opinion, because Vietnamese are stubborn. It takes several meetings for that.“

„Please don't expect too much! You already did achieve so much and we should make all these changes in such a short time?!“

„It's us, we are going through the process of transition, we want to have a say in the speed of change.“

4) Discover where the force of change lies

„It's important to know where to find both the reforming forces and the traditional forces. Than intensify the co-operation with reforming forces!“ Thus frustrating hitches can be diminished. *„Peoples should be changed, they have big networks and big influence. But one should begin with the right one.“* *„A convinced Vietnamese is a huge multiplier in his network.“*

Thereby a Vietnamese emphasises the special situation in Vietnam: *„The decision makers in Vietnam are not the same as those who define the process of change.“*

5) Remind of the target group

It is very useful constantly to remind the counterpart of the project of the target group, especially in situations of conflict: *„The target group of a project is like the child of a couple. Even if the partners are fighting, they are trying to do the best for their child. So remind the Vietnamese in your co-*

operation of the target group! Because: „If a Vietnamese feels this person is not only working for his own profit, but for Vietnam, this is a victory.“

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STEPS AT THE GTZ

Another outcome of the interviews with the AMAs were ideas which go beyond the subject “Improving Cross Cultural Understanding in Vietnam”.

On repeated occasions faults were found with the following: *„There is not enough exchange among the APs.“*, *„We have a lack of corporate identity.“*, *„AMAs have to co-operate more among themselves. Than they could gain much more influence at the Vietnamese side.“*, *„Teambuilding among the AMAs would be important.“*

Suggested measures

- For better networking among the AMAs and a better corporate identity an AMA outing has been suggested. *„But please during the week times, for example Friday afternoon. Offer it and we will see if it works! It’s worth a try!*
- A list of Vietnamese teachers with evaluation could contribute to the motivation to learn Vietnamese, because it might help avoid frustrating experiences in the search for a teacher. All people who got this list should later give an evaluation of their teachers.
- From an other country one AMA knew already the „AMA exchange of skills”. In an AMA meeting every AMA has to note professional skills which could be useful for newcomers or other AMAs. This list is sent to everybody and should be updated regularly.
- When talking about the DSE training an the initiative “Improving Cross Cultural Understanding in Vietnam” AMAs emphasised repeatedly that Vietnamese should also be prepared for their co-operation with the Germans. A training for cross cultural competence was mentioned to be as important as a vocational training in GTZ methods and procedures of German development co-operation in general.