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Doug Lipp's Cross-Cultural Training Secrets

32

Lipp Service

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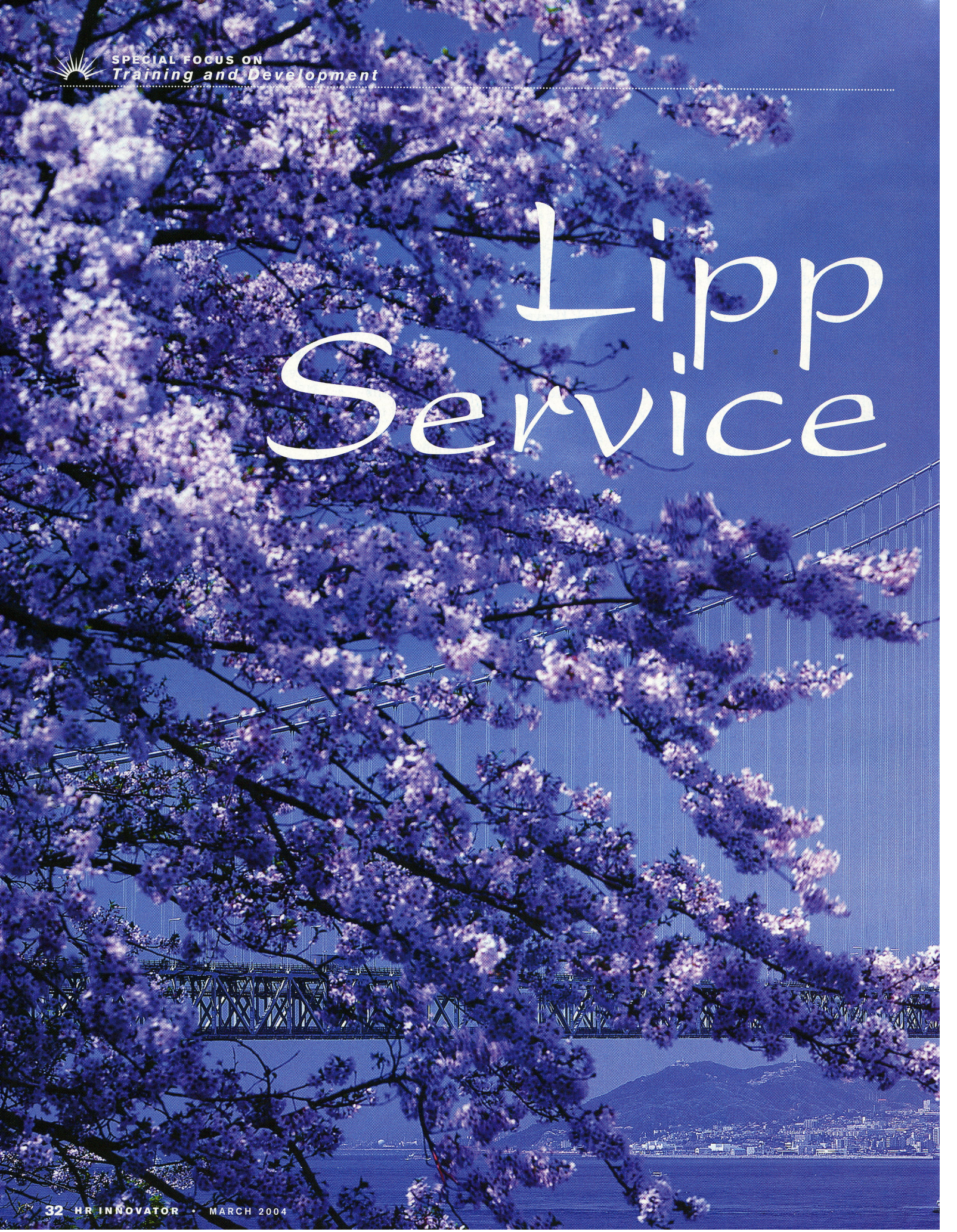


STORY BY PAM GEORGE

In a global business world, the need for cross-cultural employee training is crucial to bridging functional gaps. Former Walt Disney Co. training executive Doug Lipp knows this all too well.

The Japanese executives representing the Tokyo Disney Resort were unhappy with their nametags, and officials from the **Walt Disney Co.** in California couldn't understand why. The Japanese planned to recreate the Disney experience in Tokyo right down to the last detail. The nametags, complete with the person's first name and a perky image of Mickey Mouse, were a tradition started by none other than Walt Disney.

But in Japan, first names are reserved for close friends and family. At the celebration of the contract signing, the Japanese were appalled to see first names on their nametags. They were even more aghast when they were asked to wear them.

Disney was adamant. All Tokyo Disney employees must adhere to its corporate culture. The Japanese refused. A young Japanese employee would never address an older coworker by first name.

"It was a huge issue," recalls Doug Lipp, former head trainer at Disney Studio's Walt Disney University and part of the Tokyo startup team responsible for hiring 4,000 Japanese employees.

Though it took six months, the parties created a compromise. In America, Japanese trainees would wear tags with their first name. In Japan, they would wear badges with their last name.

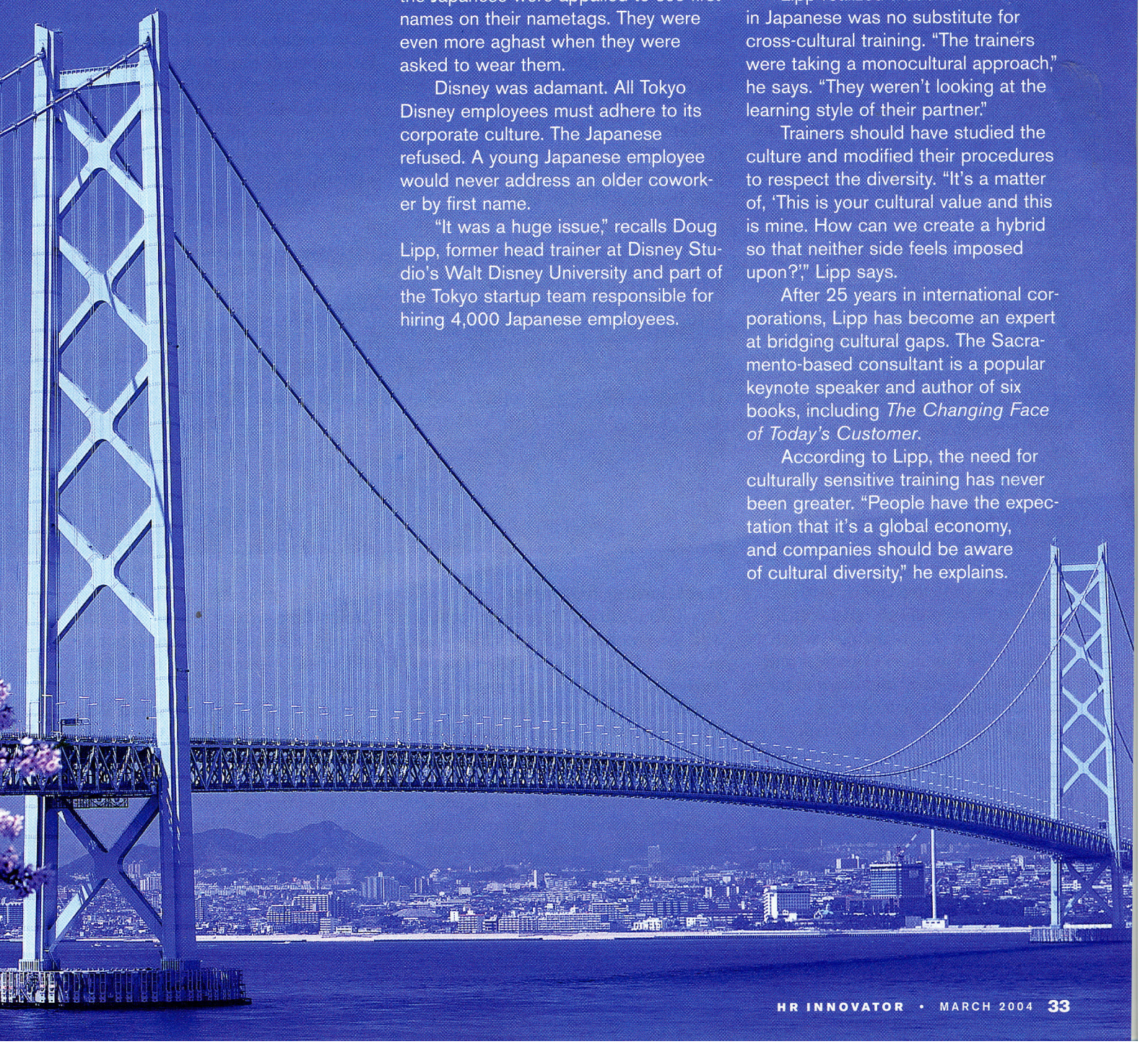
The cultural clashes didn't stop once the park was under construction, according to Lipp, who was stationed in Japan from 1981 until the Tokyo park's opening in 1983. The Japanese were shocked when American trainers publicly berated Japanese employees, causing them to "lose face" before their peers. They were perplexed when Americans quibbled over work hours.

Lipp realized that a Berlitz course in Japanese was no substitute for cross-cultural training. "The trainers were taking a monocultural approach," he says. "They weren't looking at the learning style of their partner."

Trainers should have studied the culture and modified their procedures to respect the diversity. "It's a matter of, 'This is your cultural value and this is mine. How can we create a hybrid so that neither side feels imposed upon?'," Lipp says.

After 25 years in international corporations, Lipp has become an expert at bridging cultural gaps. The Sacramento-based consultant is a popular keynote speaker and author of six books, including *The Changing Face of Today's Customer*.

According to Lipp, the need for culturally sensitive training has never been greater. "People have the expectation that it's a global economy, and companies should be aware of cultural diversity," he explains.



Not the Global Standard

Globalization isn't confined to overseas ventures. In 2000, 25 percent of all workers were foreign born, reports the **U.S. Census Bureau**. Nine million legal immigrants came to the United States between 1991 and 2000, surpassing the previous peak of 8.8 million between 1901 and 1910.

Despite the statistics, many American executives remain arrogant, Lipp says. They mistakenly believe that American values have set the global standard. Other companies act out of ignorance. Either way, their approach is "do it our way, and if you don't like it, then leave," Lipp says.

The attitude often backfires. Take Disney's next international foray, the Disneyland Resort in Paris. Once again, Disney sought to create a clean, safe environment based on American ideals. Consequently, employee facial hair—which evoked images of toothless carnival workers with tattoos—was forbidden. "It was a draconian code," Lipp says. "Cast members should blend in with the environment."

The code didn't fly with prospective French employees, who insisted on keeping their beards and mustaches. Disney stood firm. The French decided they'd rather have facial hair than the job, Lipp says.

Disney ultimately altered the policy. The company realized that as far as European customers were concerned, facial hair didn't detract from the park's show quality or its clean, safe appearance.

The decision to adapt to another culture is an example of "style switching," Lipp says. The technique, which evaluates the differences in values and beliefs, is particularly important to trainers with multicultural audiences.

"We trainers often don't think of needs other than, 'Should I use a visual here?'," Lipp says. "That's where cultural arrogance comes into play. The cultural aspect must be considered."

Too many Americans are lulled into a false sense of security because employees speak English, Lipp says. But understanding the words and understanding their meaning are two separate things.

An American manager in Tokyo learned that firsthand when he ordered Japanese workers to prepare the Haunted Mansion theme ride for a soft opening. "Make it shine," he told them. Lipp received a frantic 7 a.m. phone call. The workers had cleaned the attraction of all its artfully applied cobwebs, wallpaper stains, and layers of "dust." Restoring them required tens of thousands of dollars.

Effective communication also involves speech patterns. Lipp recently told **Microsoft** employees to "become comfortable with the silence" when asking their Japanese counterpart a question. "The Japanese need time to process," he explains. The executives must resist the urge to fill the awkward pauses with more information, which only frustrates the listeners.

switch. "I've stopped the session and gone around the table to ask, 'What do you think?'" Her initiative is appreciated, considering the Japanese won't interrupt speakers to clarify a point.

Indeed, in many cultures, questioning a teacher or person in authority is akin to insulting them. Trainers who rely on a brisk interactive session to fill 30 minutes will run out of steam after 10, Lipp notes. What's worse, the employees may not have understood the material.

He cautions against quizzing foreign-born employees in front of coworkers to evaluate their comprehension. Instead, break the entire class into groups to tackle a problem as a team. He also advises against placing foreign-born employees into separate classes. "They want to participate and be part of a group," he says.

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Questioning Authority

Lipp's client, Robin Andrew, is familiar with the problem. Andrew is the general manager of operations at **Nitto Denko America**, a Japanese company in Freemont, Calif., and human resources director at **Aveva Drug Delivery Systems** in Miramar, Fla., a recent Nitto Denko acquisition.

Andrew noticed that her Japanese counterparts would shut down during brainstorming sessions. The Americans' rapid-fire exchange was too fast for them, she says. Andrew learned to style

Unlike many American employees, foreign-born workers easily grasp the concept of teamwork. They're horrified when employers give them individual recognition.

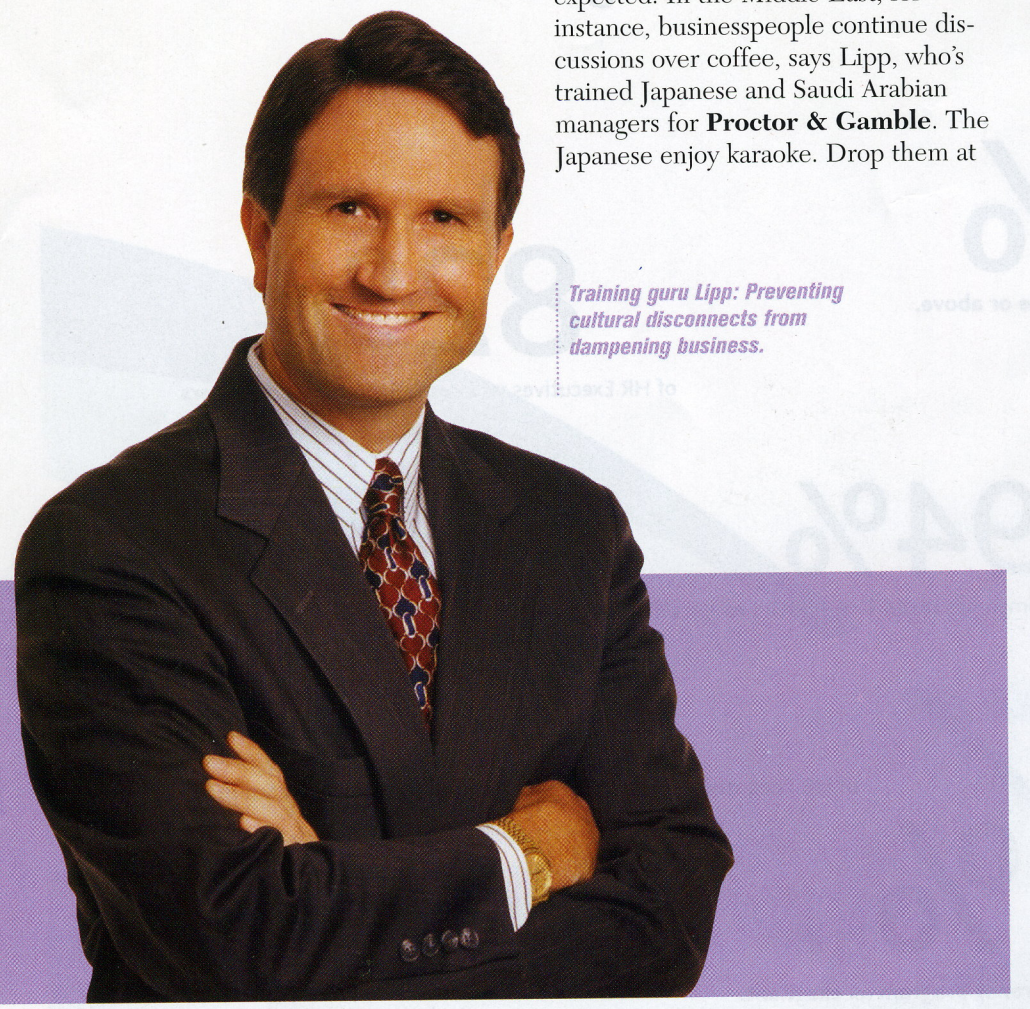
Lipp recalls the **Hollywood Video** employee from Southeast Asia who won employee of the month. The employee balked at having his photograph mounted behind the register. The manager instead mounted a photo of all the coworkers. "The manager did not force his values on someone with a different cultural mindset," Lipp says.

Trainers must be equally sensitive. "It's incumbent upon a trainer to find out those nuances before implementing the program," Lipp says. He recommends meeting with foreign-born participants before a class or meeting. Assess their language abilities as well as their knowledge of American training techniques.

Most employees appreciate the consideration, Lipp says. Andrew agrees. The Japanese are accustomed to the "meeting before the meeting," she says. "No one gets blindsided, and everyone knows what to expect." Andrew also recommends distributing handouts before the session. Use bullets to emphasize key points.

Avoid any obstacles that could distract the employee during the session. If there are Muslims in the class, make sure breaks coincide with prayer times. Don't overlook the smallest detail. "Even the scent of a ham sandwich on your breath is obnoxious in some cultures," Lipp says.

After-hour socializing may be expected. In the Middle East, for instance, businesspeople continue discussions over coffee, says Lipp, who's trained Japanese and Saudi Arabian managers for **Proctor & Gamble**. The Japanese enjoy karaoke. Drop them at their American hotels at 5:30 and they'll grow depressed and homesick.



Training guru Lipp: Preventing cultural disconnects from dampening business.

Americans who cringe at the idea of karaoke should "get over it," Lipp says. "You may sound like a sick frog croaking; but even if you screw up, the Japanese will love it. The bottom line is relationships."

There are instances when companies can't compromise. Japanese playgrounds and theme parks are "filthy," Lipp says. Disney, who built its reputation on cleanliness, would never conform to the Japanese norm.

Safety is another factor. When Lipp worked for **NEC Electronics**, he took American engineers to train in Japan. Japanese factory workers were not required to wear safety glasses. That wasn't the case for the visiting Americans. "We weren't going to bend to the culture at the risk of being injured," Lipp says.

The Japanese workers also wore hard-soled plastic shoes without arches. "It's like wearing sandals all day long," Lipp says. "American feet and legs aren't used to those shoes. To make matters worse, Japanese shoe sizes only went to size 10. I had guys who were size 11 and 13." The Americans covered their own shoes with generic booties to blend in.

Clearly, culture coaches like Lipp can help companies determine when and how to adapt. Yet most companies already have onsite resources. When Lipp's client **Bell Mobility** decided to target the burgeoning Chinese population, the Canadian company quizzed its Chinese employees.

"We learned that Chinese customers negotiate more, and it's acceptable for customer service representatives to say, 'This is the price, and we're sorry you don't like it'," Lipp says. "They learned not to get into lengthy negotiations."

Lipp also recommends consulting repatriates. The process serves a dual purpose. "Repatriates were a big fish in a little pond, and they want to do more back home," says Lipp, who's experienced the frustration himself.

Whether a company works with a culture coach or employees, the goal is the same: Develop an approach based on the culled information and the company mission. Lipp refers to it as a "cultural sense approach."

"It's more effective than the insensitive and failure-prone common sense approach many companies still rely on today," he concludes.

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