

A Classroom Without Walls

Global technology and engineering firm

Business leaders from multinational corporations don't typically expect to learn how to address their business challenges from illiterate delivery people on the streets in India. Yet, a day spent accompanying the Mumbai lunchbox delivery servers known as dabawallas provided senior executives of a global technology and engineering firm with insights not only on operational effectiveness but also on unique cultural aspects of Indian life.

Instead of spending their time in a classroom in a Western country, Duke Corporate Education (Duke CE) program participants are learning in and from the streets, shops, homes and businesses of countries to which they are unaccustomed. They experience the sights, smells and, at times, chaos of unfamiliar markets.



This culturally immersive experience was just one facet of the highly customized developmental program created by Duke CE for this firm. Realizing that their key growth markets were in countries unfamiliar to them, such as China, Brazil and India, the firm engaged Duke CE. The charge was to help develop a cadre of globally savvy leaders who could think strategically about the needs of customers in fast-growing markets and manage cross-cultural staff teams as the business entered new markets.

“As we talked with the client, we realized that while many of the participants had lived overseas, they had lived an expatriate life and had very limited encounters with the culture,” says Sara Nilsson DeHanas, the Duke CE project director who worked with this firm. “We needed to let them see, feel, taste, encounter and actually engage with the places and people that are the future of

their business.”

The executives followed the dabawallas into homes, onto crowded trains, and into the offices where lunch was delivered and learned valuable lessons about customer expectations and lifestyles in Mumbai. The day with the dabawallas was just one of a number of singular experiences designed specifically for the firm's executives. And cultural immersion isn't limited to the developing world. In fact, this group of European business leaders was sent on a customer experience journey in New York City, gaining insights from other industries on how to build customer loyalty and spark innovation.

The results? The company's CEO says that as a direct result of this executive program, the company has expanded its focus on the bottom of the pyramid, innovating to design lower cost products that are functional in environments where they have to withstand heat, moisture and intermittent electricity. He notes that leaders in each of the firm's business units increasingly have an eye on how systems differ throughout the world, particularly in emerging markets.

U.S.-based medical technology company

Duke CE also developed a unique curriculum for a U.S.-based medical technology company that wanted to develop a leadership cadre facile and comfortable in navigating in a global context. With more than 60 percent of their sales in the U.S., this company's leaders recognized that in order to grow their business, they needed to engage differently in emerging markets.

"We needed to address a two-pronged challenge," says Pete Gerend, managing director at Duke CE. "We needed to help them build a global mindset. And we needed a vehicle to improve their thinking about how they could effectively enter these new markets."

A trip to Shanghai provided the team with insights into the culture of China. Cultural excursions in which small teams ventured into the community yielded diverse insights. The group that visited an old retail section of the city viewed traditional herbal medicine being practiced. They saw firsthand how China's values and mores around health differ from those in the U.S., offering them a different view of the market.

The executives who visited the Shanghai Science and Technology Center viewed a scale model that had been created as part of the city's preparation for Expo 2010. This facilitated their understanding of how the Chinese market is distinctive in its approach to centralized planning and large-scale projects.

After learning about the practice of families pooling resources to pay for health care for an ill family member, the executives realized the overlap between patient education and funding. They appreciated the importance of building awareness among extended family members about the potential benefits of the company's medical devices so that the family might make a collective investment. That prompted them to think differently about the both the ways they thought about their customers and about how they built partnerships with new organizations to promote patient and physician education.

"The world is a great classroom and a great teacher," says Gerend. "Culturally immersive experiences allow executives to develop their own capabilities in the area of global awareness. We use the time that folks spend in different markets thinking about real solutions to real business problems. Our offering of an academic framework combined with real experiences allows our clients to learn what they need to know to change their business and succeed."