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Management Training in Russia - Some critical remarks

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Soon after the collapse of the communist regime in the former Soviet Union it became clear that the transition to a market economy does not only require large financial resources but also qualified enterprise managers that would be able to develop new market opportunities, build efficient organizations and motivate their employees. To assist Russia and the Newly Independent States in this task many Western institutions like the European Union or the Worldbank set up special funds to finance management training and development programs. After more than ten years, however, it seems that these programs have more helped American and European business schools to extend their activities than the Russian economy on its way to a market system. Own experiences and the analysis of empirical studies show that three main reasons are responsible for the low relevance, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of management training in Russia: the inadequate content, methods, and trainers.

In the beginning of the transformation process most donators expected that Russia will quickly transform its economy into a market system with the same actors, rules and institutions as in western industrialized countries. Consequently, the need for management training was perceived to be very similar, too. As expected, western management textbooks were translated into Russian language, MBA programs were established at Russian universities and hundreds of professors and management trainers from western business schools came to the country to teach courses in economics, marketing and management.

More and more, however, it becomes obvious that this ethnocentric approach does not fit with the Russian conditions. Not only that teachers coming to Russia are mostly second-class professors without sound knowledge of the country, but that the materials and didactic concepts they use are inappropriate. In most cases they rest on standard textbooks and standard cases without any adaptation to the very specific requirements of Russian managers.¹ What they need is less cognitive and operational knowledge in form of checklists and basic principles but to develop new attitudes and values of management. In most cases this means

¹ One of the most widespread management textbooks in Russia that was translated from an American original is „Osnovy mened_menta“ by M.H. Mescon, M. Albert and F. Khedouri, a book, that is virtually unknown in the U.S. or in Western Europe.

first of all to destroy old stereotypes of *upravlenie* that were established under the orthodox administrative-command system.

To be able facilitate this learning process western management trainers need to know more about the Russian economy than what they know from CNN features. Particularly, they must be prepared to use interactive methods of learning such as role playing, case studies and business games that are designed to emphasize differences between various theories, positions and concepts and to enable the participants to develop their own methods of thinking and acting. Most qualified western management trainers, however, have not sufficient knowledge of Russian language while only few Russian managers speak foreign languages fluently. Consequently, in most cases consecutive translation is used which does not only delay the learning process but also prevents trainers from using interactive training methods. As a result, changes of attitudes and behaviour, having been identified as the main training need in Russia, are nearly impossible. What is taught is primarily cognitive knowledge.

How management trainings can be designed efficiently is shown by several foreign firms that are operating on the Russian market. Generally, their experiences show that the highest impact and sustainability have in-house courses that are closely related to workplace problems. Recipients of on-the-job trainings find it easier to implement newly acquired theoretical knowledge in their operational practice. A training concept that is specially designed for this reason is the so called tandem or parallel management. In this concept key management positions are assigned to two people, an experienced expatriate and a local junior manager. For a pre-determined period of time both managers deal with the same issues and are equally responsible for the results. As a result, the local junior manager learns day-to-day operating procedures in a far more direct and practical way than by classroom seminars or lectures. However, a key precondition is that both managers must appear at least publicly to be equal in status and competence, no matter what differences they might have in private. Moreover, foreign expatriates must be prepared for this task. This means that they do not only have to be motivated to perform their functions (those of marketing, finance or production), but to coach local colleagues and to introduce them into new management concepts.