Culture of cooperation

A Cigna team helps Indonesia in a Northeastern University program — and returns a bit wiser

By Steve Maas

Take right. American IT executives, plunk them in towns without reliable internet and cellular connections — much less electricity and indoor plumbing — and see what they can accomplish.

Sounds like a spinoff of “Survivor” that no one gets kicked off the island — or, in this case, the archipelago. Rather, winning depends on cooperation, not competition.

Cigna Corp. sent the executives to Indonesia for nearly two weeks to learn about the people and help two minority groups improve their computer capabilities. It was more than altruism, though. The Connecticut insurance company hoped the experience would offer insight on how to succeed in the Indonesian marketplace, and the executives came back with a better understanding of the country and new outlooks on their jobs back home.

The Cigna mission was the pilot project for the Culture Agility Leadership Lab, or CALL, based at Northeastern University’s D’Amore-Picard School of Business. It is the brainchild of Paula Caligiuri, a professor of international business and strategy. The lab, launched last fall with $100,000 from the university’s Karl and Fred Broyd Fund for International Initiatives, matches corporations with not-for-profit groups (known as NGOs) or nongovernmental organizations that operate in developing regions around the world.

The corporations provide volunteers for up to six months to help the NGOs in areas such as marketing, finance, and technology.

In return, the companies get back employees with greater knowledge, understanding, and awareness of other countries and cultures, a vital asset in today’s global economy.

“There’s a desperate need for companies to make sure they build up their leaders to be effective in these multicultural environments,” said Caligiuri, a psychologist who has spent 25 years helping American workers navigate foreign cultures.

Caligiuri modeled CALL programs sponsored by individual corporations that send teams abroad for short stints advising not-for-profit organizations. CALL partners with the National Peace Corps Association, a nonprofit network of Peace Corps alumni, which provides coaches who brief corporate teams on foreign cultures and accompany them on trips.

John M. Staines, Cigna’s human resources officer for global information technology, volunteered with Cigna at the pilot participants after attending a CALL introductory conference last fall. Staines runs an IT leadership program that was already scheduled to spend a week in Indonesia, learning about its society.

Before the trip, the Cigna group attended a seminar led by two Peace Corp volunteers who had served in Indonesia. The executives practiced shaking hands, for example. Indonesians do so with a soft grip and then place their right hands over their heart as a sign of sincerity.

They also learned that Indonesians treat small talk as a formality but are a prerequisite for doing business. “You build that relationship through getting to know them and having them get to know you,” Staines said.

The Cigna executives met Indonesians in both urban and rural settings. They then broke into two teams, interviewing themselves for three to five weeks with the NGOs.

Rajesh Singh, executive director with Cigna’s IT customers solutions group, found himself in a remote town that consists of tiny huts strung across two mountains in East Bali. Parts of the town become accessible to cars only during the past decade, and many of its residents are still learning how to build bathrooms.

The NGO’s approach of teaching Butterfly through its children’s art has him rethinking how to roll out new computer programs. He might, for instance, limit members of the accounting department to train their peers, then not introduce it until coming in and scanning something down their throat.

Singh said that when he arrived in Indonesia, he had a backpack full of computers, only to be told to take them back. “It’s not something from IT coming in and slamming something down their throat,” Singh said.

When Dave Zervos, a Cigna management senior director, walked into the headquarters of the ROSE (Rivers, Dolphins, Lands and Ecologies) Foundation, he was surprised to find paint peeling from cinderblock walls and the director sharing an office with five workers.

You’re left with the initial impression of how anything that goes wrong here,” he said.

After spending a day using the program in action — promoting sustainable agriculture and women’s education and business development — he said he “quickly realized it’s pretty organized.”

That afternoon, Cigna crew taught young women how to use several Windows programs. The next day, they set to work on the main task — helping to develop software for ROSE to track its receipts and donors. They started by taking basic questions about what ROSE wanted to achieve.

“I don’t think we know how much the East Bali projects accomplished or how much their programs contributed to the success of the mission,” Singh said.

Perhaps most eye-opening for the Cigna executives was how happy the Indonesians appeared to be. They all spoke of an 85-year-old couple who invited the Cigna visitors into their home. The couple raised eight children in this tiny house. They have more than 50 grandchildren and more than 10 great grandchildren. They still work in the fields every day.

The man suffers from high blood pressure, but counts on his wife to cook him chicken soup when he’s feeling well.

“The main thing is that he has so little in terms of material items and money, but he can express the presence of joy and happiness that I’ve never seen in my eyes,” said Maureen Mellett, a Cigna IT director based in Philadelphia.

“I hope to never lose sight of that perspective he gave me.”

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