

## Capitalizing on Cultural Differences

**Choosing the best from two cultures, skillfully making use of the resultant talents, maintaining identity and drawing personal advantage from interchange: Aventis CropScience is creating this kind of cultural flexibility through a special form of training. People who have received this training can more easily recognize cultural differences and their roots, break down prejudices against others, avoid hurdles and misunderstandings at work, and become citizens of the world, in the best sense of the term**



Jacques Pateau, French Germanist and sociologist, is in charge of intercultural training

The intercultural training program at Aventis CropScience is led by Professor Jacques Pateau and his team at the Technical University of Compiègne. Professor Pateau traces the roots of cultural differences between the Germans, the French, the British, and Americans to their different histories. For example, in comparing Germany and France Pateau makes the following observations.

Whereas Germany was characterized until well into the 19th century by a predominance of small principalities, France has been characterized for centuries by its centralism. Paris was always the center of power. The decentralized structure of Germany, however, contributed to its tendency towards consensus-building. The most important element in this model was the community. According to Pateau, the consequences of this historical development in Germany were continuity and a systematic approach to work, but less flexibility when it came to the implementation of decisions. For hundreds of years, however, the imperial culture of France orientated it towards a far-off authority in Paris. French propensities for diplomacy and etiquette stem from this history shaped by a royal court. Pateau notes, "These different developments have consequences for how people communicate with

each other. In Germany, people tend to come straight to the point; in France, the tendency is more towards intimation. In Germany, decisions are reached after long and careful consideration and then implemented in a disciplined manner. In France decisions are reached and introduced more quickly and with more creativity but they are implemented with a certain lack of consistency."

With the help of the intercultural training program, Aventis CropScience employees are learning how the culture, history, and education systems of their different countries affect their behavior, language, and management styles. They come to understand that decisions can be shaped by different ways of thinking. This intercultural knowledge means they can understand different cultures and communicate in an open and understanding manner. They learn to accept and value the ways in which people from other cultures think, they appreciate the importance of developing team spirit, and they make every effort to find the highest degree of effectiveness in their work together.

The intercultural training program begins with so-called kick-off meetings, which also played a part in the founding phase of Aventis CropScience. The meetings use role play and simulations to sensitize people to intercultural realities. They make it clear that the rules of play are not the same everywhere and help the participants understand each other's systems better.

The second phase of the intercultural training program centers on integration. Once again, an emphasis is placed on pointing out the historical, sociological, and religious currents that lead to cultural differences between the Germans, the French, the British, and the Americans and how these differences can actually be used for the mutual benefit of everyone concerned. The third phase of the program deals with everyday interaction within a multicultural team. When understanding between partners grows, prejudices and clichés tend to fade into the background. Professor Pateau says, "We have to be careful to avoid over-adaptation. What we are trying to do here is

### Personal Statement on Intercultural Communication from Jürgen Asshauer, Chief Technology Officer:

"Listening, I repeat, listening, getting to know others better, seeing what is different in a new way, better understanding of behavior, seeking what it is we have in common, and approaching what is new and understanding it together – all of these are keys to the future success of Aventis CropScience. Intercultural semi-

nars, such as those we have established with Jacques Pateau Consultants, show us our present prejudices in various and astounding ways.

Although the main theme of the seminars revolves around the cultural differences between the French, the Germans, and the British, for Aventis CropScience

this entire process is all about creating a new basis for developing new forms of co-operation on an international and multicultural level. Our employees and customers come from every cultural background on earth. Our common purpose and interest is to make sure we do right by all of them."



*Employees from different countries and business cultures come together in a series of intercultural workshops. The goal: building a better company through better cooperation*

understand the thinking of each system and not adopt one system over another. The advantages of both systems should be used to the benefit of everyone.”

If difficulties in international communication are first understood and analyzed, they are then easier to overcome. People come to see that such differences are neither huge nor insurmountable and that diversity itself can be used for mutual benefit. For Karin Schwerdtner, Head of Human Resources Development in Germany, it is clear

that cultural flexibility and cultural knowledge cannot be avoided: “Our team development training is very highly valued. The central topic is the need for colleagues from various cultural backgrounds to work together in a concrete way to improve the efficiency of the integration process. Furthermore, the give and take between different forms of management, communication, and cooperation helps contribute to the formation of a new corporate culture.”