

A Funny Thing Happened at Work

A Revealing Training Session

In this installment, Mike Crawford, CPA, describes how even the most prepared professional can still be surprised by the unexpected.



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For 20 years, I have provided a number of professional training sessions in governmental accounting and auditing across the United States. In 1994, I received a phone call from an acquaintance who said a federal government agency was searching for an experienced CPA to provide training to various island governments in the South Pacific and asked if I was interested. Intrigued, I agreed to try it out. I called the organization and was hired immediately. I should have suspected their quick response was a hint of things to come. I got my passport and packed my bags.

My first assignment was to provide a weeklong training session to governmental employees on the island of Yap in Micronesia. Although I had heard of Micronesia, I had not heard of Yap. A state in Micronesia, I have since learned Yap is probably one of the most interesting in terms of traditions.

My trip began with a meeting in Honolulu with representatives of the agency sponsoring the training. The training program was named The Pacific Island Training Initiative or PITI (pronounced "pity"). They tell me no pun was intended.

While the Honolulu representatives gave me an orientation about the training program, they failed to tell me much about Yap and what I should expect. I later found out the limited information approach was intended to see how I would react to what I was about to encounter.

After the long trip from Honolulu through Guam, I landed at the Yap International Airport. I picked up my bags and boarded an open-air taxi bus to my lodging facility (arranged for me by the Honolulu representatives). I refer to it

as a "lodging facility" rather than a hotel for good reason.

Called the Pathways, the facility was a quaint little resort with an open-air lobby and bar at street level and a series of eight thatch-roofed bungalows set into a rain-forest-type hillside above street level. As soon as I checked in and walked up to my room, I knew this would be a unique experience.

My bungalow for the week was packaged serenity, a well-kept hut with the basics of restful lodging. It contained a bed, a chair, a ceiling fan, a restroom/shower and a bottled water dispenser. There were no electronics anywhere — no television, no phone, no radio, no computer. I only brought two books to read and I had them finished in no time at all. At times, when the rain would come down and roll off the thatch roof, I would have to continuously feel my pulse to make sure I was still alive.

The uniqueness of this trip was just beginning. The morning after my first night on the island, I was picked up at the Pathways by a Yap government employee and driven to the training site. Upon entering the training room (a small room with about eight tables arranged in a U-shape), I got my first look at the Yapese attending my training session. My initial thought was, "This cannot be my class."

Why? Some of the class participants were wearing traditional Yap clothing, which involves wearing *nothing* from the waist up — men and women alike.

I don't care how well you prepare for classes, you could not prepare for this.

I recalled the advice we are all taught in speech class: if you get nervous, just imagine the audience is naked. Whoever dreamed up that advice obviously never had to present a program in Yap. Then I

remembered I was there for training all week, not just for an hour or two. I found it very difficult to look the participants in the eye — or anywhere else for that matter.

The next thing that caught my attention was what appeared to be a series of empty paint buckets on the floor between the participants' chairs. I had no idea what purpose they served, but I soon found out. Before class started and throughout the duration of the class, all the participants were constantly preparing some concoction and putting it their mouths to chew. I asked about the substance was told it was betelnut. They explained betelnut is similar to a mild drug or stimulant. It is a nut that grows on certain palm trees on the islands and is mixed with crushed coral and wrapped in a leaf prior to chewing. While chewing betelnut, a person's saliva turns blood red.

The purpose of the empty paint buckets on the floor suddenly became clear. They were spittoons for the betelnut juice. What's worse, the class didn't spit in unison. All day, every day, they would spit or drool into the buckets. At times it looked like they were bleeding internally.

Now try to completely envision this training environment: half-naked participants, with big lumps in the sides of their faces, constantly spitting into buckets, smiling with teeth blackened by stains from the betelnut juice and speaking broken English. Now, that's a challenge.

When I returned to Honolulu for a debriefing with agency representatives, I asked why they had failed to fully orientate me to the Yap culture. They said it is more fun to let new instructors be surprised. I assured them I was surprised. But on the bright side, I have provided training to a group of half-naked, spitting Yapese. I can provide training to anyone. €

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