

**Dialogue Training Center: a 'bold leap' for AllianzGI**

The Dialogue Training Center (DTC) – which houses AllianzGI's Dialogue in the Dark (DiD) and now Dialogue in Silence (DiS) – has been officially launched in Munich. Operating as a business unit within AllianzGI, the DTC aims to attract German and international businesses which want to capitalize on the innovative employee and management training on offer. In the case of the DiD, training takes place in a totally darkened environment and is facilitated by blind trainers. Whereas, in the DiS, a soundproof, silent environment is the backdrop, and a deaf or hearing-impaired trainer facilitates the session. The DTC is one of the first Allianz Group initiatives to be awarded an Allianz4Good seal.

Head of the Dialogue Training Center Angelika Antz-Hieber invited colleagues, supporters of the DTC and representatives of Munich-based organizations who work with people with Disabilities to the formal opening of the DTC on September 28. AllianzGI Chief Operating Officer and member of the Allianz Group Diversity Council Marna Whittington, AllianzGI Global Head of HR Beat Bucher and Antz-Hieber were on hand to welcome guests and to reflect on the realization of a significant milestone. "The DTC is the culmination of four years of formulating, planning, and organizing," said Whittington. "When we first learned about this concept, we realized the potential training in the dark and in silence could have for leadership development. We now have a dedicated, professional human resource training facility which embodies the best of AllianzGI and evokes the qualities that makes AllianzGI a preeminent financial advisor: trust, leadership and diversity."

**New avenues**

For Bucher, who, along with AllianzGI CEO Joachim Faber and Marna Whittington, has been an ardent promoter of the DTC from the outset, the project has been an interesting experience: "Getting the DTC up and running has opened up new avenues for our company," he said. "Before we undertook this project, I had never interacted with blind people; now we have some excellent new colleagues in our DTC team. It has been exciting to step into a different world, and, as a result, have a facility which positions AllianzGI as a company recognized for innovative training methods."

Andreas Heinecke, the founder of the original Dialogue in the Dark concept and CEO of a company called Dialogue Social Enterprise, with whom Allianz GI development the project and from whom it gets its license, lauded AllianzGI for its vision: "This facility embodies the future of HR development," he commented, noting that Allianz was the only company to realize the potential of his DiD concept as a human resource training facility. Heinecke complimented AllianzGI for sticking with its decision to realize a goal that was conceived long before the financial crisis sent ripples through society and financial institutions. Likewise, Dirk Reiche, Head of Allianz Group Social Opportunities, called the

exercise a “bold leap” for AllianzGI: “Given the economic crisis, it would have been easy to step back. It’s good to see that even in difficult times, we can make things happen.”

#### A fun experience

While diversity awareness is a natural outcome of time spent in either of the DTC facilities, its benefit as an employee and management training facility – with an emphasis on leadership skills and team building – is already being reflected by the number of return customers. “Some clients, including Marna Whittington, have organized as many as three or four sessions for different management and employee groups,” notes Antz-Hieber.

Gerhard Hastreiter, Senior Vice President Customers & Sales with Allianz Deutschland (Germany) AG’s IT department, has been through four DiD training sessions with different groups – three of which he organized from teams within the 300 or so employees that report to him. Each time he’s come away with something different. “The DiD is an innovative concept,” he remarked, “and one that works: you have to change your perceptions the minute you step into the darkened environment. This, in turn, causes people to alter their behavior; to slow down, to reflect a little longer, to listen more attentively and to communicate more clearly. You definitely see behavior and team dynamics change as you go through the DiD.” And another bonus, he points out, is that it’s also a really fun experience.

Antz-Hieber can now list several highlights since joining the DTC last February: the informal opening of the DiD last March for 230 of Allianz’s top managers; the recent addition of the Dialogue in Silence training facility (see below) and the addition of extra training rooms to accommodate larger groups; DiD training sessions for Fortune 500 companies in the Munich area as well as for Allianz and AllianzGI employees – all to highly favorable comment. “It is good to be at this stage,” she says, “but this is really only the start of the process. Our doors are now fully open for business. We can customize DiD or DiS training according to whatever requirements managers have. In the run up to Christmas, many of our training events will take place in holiday mode. We’re open to hearing what managers want and we will work to that.”

#### **Box**

Dialogue in Silence: Listening with your eyes

In addition to the Dialogue in the Dark (DiD), the DTC recently began to offer Dialogue in Silence (DiS) training, where deaf or hearing-impaired trainers lead training sessions and welcome participants to a world without speech: a world where gesture, facial expression, mime and body language become the primary communication tools.

Andrea Hierholzer, from AllianzGI Global HR, has participated in Dialogue in the Dark and Dialogue in Silence trainings. “I would see both as complementary,” she says. “Each one works to enhance team building, communication, trust, self-awareness and self-reflection.”

Being accustomed to relying heavily on verbal communication for work, Hierholzer wasn't sure she would enjoy the experience of having to remain silent during the DiS. She was pleasantly surprised: "It was actually great to be asked to use your whole body, and to convey a message through body language and mime," she says. "This frees something within you: you tap into your creativity and imagination to express yourself. If you compare this to the disciplined manner in which we behave in the office environment, it can be a refreshing release."

And she didn't feel at all deprived at not being able to talk. "The silence is actually welcome, as is the sense of peace that pervades you," she says. "And people couldn't interrupt one another!" she adds. "You learn to listen with your eyes until people have finished communicating."

### **Information on the DTC**

What is offered: Management and team-building training in a Dialogue in the Dark (DiD) or Dialogue in Silence (DiS) environment

Next DIS program: November 26, 15:30 to 19:30

December 17, 15:30 to 19:30

Where: AllianzGI, Seidl Street 26, Munich

Capacity: Group sizes of 5 to 70 people

Cost: Price varies according to group size and training required. Contact [angelika.antz-hieber@allianzgi.com](mailto:angelika.antz-hieber@allianzgi.com) for a quote or further information

How to book: Booking hotline +49 89 1220 7144/website [www.dialogue.allianzgi.com](http://www.dialogue.allianzgi.com) /e-mail [dialogue-in-the-dark@allianzgi.com](mailto:dialogue-in-the-dark@allianzgi.com)

What to expect: In both trainings, participants are led through a series of activities and interactions – some in simulated town or park environments – by a blind facilitator in the case of DiD, or a deaf or hearing-impaired facilitator in the case of DiS. Being deprived of a predominant sense or facility, participants are taken out of their comfort zones: perceptions are challenged, roles are reversed. While training focuses on leadership development and/or team building, diversity awareness, self awareness, conflict resolution, enhanced communication and problem solving skills are some of the outcomes.

Who should visit the DiD/DiS: Anyone who is open to a new learning experience