

ASIAN ASSIGNEES WITH AMERICAN COWORKERS: PREDICTABLE PROBLEMS, POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

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Our consulting practice frequently is called upon to facilitate the integration of expatriates from Asia into professional environments in the United States. Much of our responsibility is for initial cultural coaching of each newcomer and his or her spouse. Our follow-ups with both the newcomers and our client firms reveal that, in spite of the best intentions on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, and in spite of our coaching of the newcomers, both Asian expatriates in the U.S. and their American colleagues face difficult cross-cultural

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challenges. These are perplexing and frustrating for all concerned and invariably result in sharply lowered productivity. These challenges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

■ *Despite communication, planning, and best intentions on both sides, assignments of Asians in the U.S. can run into predictable difficulties, as three case studies show.*

■ *Differences in the way both sides view senior-junior relationships and preferred training methods, as well as the barriers set up by the U.S.'s "low context" culture and Asia's "high context" cultures, exacerbated by both sides' attempts to save the other's "face," can lead to less than productive or even failed assignments and a loss of trust.*

■ *To prevent these misunderstandings, both sides should learn the values underlying the other's culture, planning should take place face-to-face to permit the parties to fully understand what the agreement means to each, and time should be structured at the beginning of the assignment to allow the assignee to settle in and build relationships.*

follow predictable patterns, leading to the possibility of prevention, which always is far more cost-effective than remediation.

Following are the stories of three Asian professionals who came to the United States on expatriate assignments, and whose presence in an American workplace led to problems that were sufficiently severe to motivate the company to request our intervention. (All three Asians spoke English well or very well, so that lack of language facility was a negligible factor in all three cases.) The lessons we will draw from these three experiences are supplemented by our acquaintance with numerous other Asian-U.S. cross-cultural upheavals in American offices.

THE CASE OF MR. A

Mr. A was the first individual from his Japanese division sent to the U.S. The company designated his assignment as "developmental," and he viewed himself as a trainee. Soon after arriving at his new office, Mr. A was assigned to an internal trainer, an American who

was responsible for Mr. A's learning according to a set of objectives jointly developed by the Japanese sending division and the American receiving division.

Little time passed before Mr. A complained of adjustment difficulties and stress and reported confusion and dissatisfaction over the content and purpose of his developmental program. It became apparent that, even though there had been direct communication between the sending and receiving divisions regarding this program, there had been almost no mutual understanding. The Japanese sending division had put forward broad objectives, such as upgrading Mr. A's ability to communicate in English and enabling him to improve his abilities as a global manager. These general objectives were easy for the American receiving division to accept. The problem was that the American side interpreted the objectives quite differently from what the Japanese side had in mind.

A closely related problem was that Mr. A's expectations regarding acceptable training methods were sharply at variance with the expectations of his American trainer. These differing expectations touched on several levels of the learning process:

How do individuals best learn? From Mr. A's Japanese perspective, learning is best accomplished through watching, listening, talking with people, and similar experiences. He expected to absorb useful knowledge by immersing himself in a wide variety of culturally and functionally different situations during his sojourn in the States.

From the American trainer's point of view, learning is best accomplished through active,

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hands-on completion of carefully chosen tasks and assignments that have specific, measurable learning outcomes. He viewed immersion/absorption as passive and thus a waste of time.

How do trainees best interact with trainers? As a Japanese, Mr. A was accustomed to a supportive senior-junior relationship between trainer and trainee. Although he hoped primarily to absorb information, he also was accustomed to receiving assignments; in this case, he expected specific instructions from the trainer on the nature of the task and the process of completing it. He assumed that he, the trainee, would do precisely as instructed, and that the trainer, a knowledgeable and involved guide, would be responsible for ensuring successful learning outcomes.

The American trainer expected people in his role to set learning tasks for trainees, then to provide comparatively little instruction. He assumed that trainees learn best when using a do-it-yourself, trial-and-error approach. The American viewed trainers and trainees as near-equals; he viewed trainees as self-reliant individuals who accept responsibility for ensuring a successful outcome of their own learning. He also subscribed to the American expectation that trainees may negotiate with trainers about the nature and extent of their assignments.

What are appropriate learning objectives? This point returns to

the lack of effective communication between the sending and receiving divisions. To interculturalists, Japan is recognized as a "high context" culture. A high context culture is one in which people constantly communicate with colleagues and friends about a very wide range of topics, and thereby come to have a comprehensive knowledge and nuanced understanding of people, events, things, procedures, social and political realities—in short, the entire context of their daily lives. When people who already are "high contexted" work together, their communication about any specific matter, even a relatively new one, tends to be brief but loaded with shared understanding because they already are well aware of all the factors directly and indirectly impinging upon it. Of course, the process of becoming highly contexted requires much time and effort.

Interculturalists type the U.S. as a "low context" culture in which people tend to communicate with others not only less thoroughly but also about a less comprehensive range of topics. Thus, low context people are less well informed about the overall context of their daily lives. When low context people work together, their communication about any specific matter of importance (such as an assignment) requires careful, focused attention in order to "get everyone on the same page," identify and analyze relevant factors, and develop shared meanings.

One can now appreciate, perhaps, that the single set of learning objectives so readily agreed upon by the two divisions was subject to two interpretations. For the Japanese, those objectives meant that Mr. A was to become highly contexted in the ways of American

business and social life, best realized by his broadly immersing himself in U.S. daily life for an extended period of time. But to the Americans, those objectives meant that Mr. A was to complete a series of assignments, such as mastering computer software programs, that would introduce him to discrete features of how things get done in the U.S. This discrepancy in learning objectives is not just theoretical. It was stressful for Mr. A and actually caused a serious setback in his developmental program, wasting his highly paid time as well as that of his American trainer.

THE CASE OF MS. B

Ms. B came to the United States from Shanghai, China, where she held an important and relatively senior position. She was assigned to work with an American supervisor who recognized that she was a very able individual; consequently, he quickly gave her several responsibilities.

A cross-cultural conundrum soon emerged in Ms. B's case. She viewed herself as a trainee. Her American manager, who suspected that she outranked him in the company hierarchy, knew that her assignment was "developmental" but actually treated her as a full-fledged professional who could get things done...and lots of them. The outcome was that Ms. B soon became completely overwhelmed.

This conundrum was not merely a simple misunderstanding about the purpose of Ms. B's overseas assignment. Trying to be cross-culturally sensitive about Ms. B's abilities and position, the American manager did a very American thing: he assumed that Ms. B was a self-reliant learner and doer who could keep up with his unit's insane timetable, and he therefore

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gave her one assignment after another...and left her alone. He *meant* to convey confidence in her; he assumed that if he gave her a great deal of advice and assistance, he would imply doubt about her abilities, thus causing her to lose face. He also avoided giving her any direct feedback about the burgeoning shortcomings in her performance, perhaps because of face considerations, perhaps because he thought she outranked him. When her faltering became serious, he assigned American staff members to assist her, presumably to avoid taking assignments away from her as well as to forestall total failure.

From her Chinese perspective as a trainee, Ms. B did *not* view herself as a self-reliant learner and doer. She wanted the manager to give her exactly what he was deliberately not giving her: step-by-step instructions about both content and process and lots of supportive guidance so that she would master the learning and not fail in any way.

Ms. B also did *not* view herself as of higher rank than her manager, but as of lower rank because she was the learner and he the teacher (the salient feature of the relationship from her point of view). Therefore, "face" considerations compelled Ms. B to never question the wisdom of her multiple assignments, never protest her deadlines. A Chinese learner-follower would not cause her master to lose face by questioning his judgment. Actually, as an American, the manager

probably would have been open to feedback from a direct-report as well as a superior.

Americans are often advised to try to take the "face" of Asians into account when dealing with them. Asians naturally pay attention to face issues. In this interesting case, however, we see that even when both sides were consciously trying to do the right thing, they got it wrong.

THE CASE OF MR. C

Mr. C came to the United States from Japan, where he was viewed as very successful and had attained a leadership position at what, in Japan, was a rather young age. His assignment was not developmental; he was considered an expert in certain kinds of technology transfer and was sent to the U.S. due to this expertise as well as because the company, determined to globalize, wanted to have a Japanese in the U.S. office. In fact, Mr. C was the first in what was projected to be a steady flow of expatriate assignments for this division of the company.

There are two unusual features of Mr. C's case. First, he had previously lived in the U.S. and possessed a four-year degree from an American university. Second, his supervisor was a woman who was so abrasive in her relationships with colleagues and subordinates that the company engaged our consultancy to provide her with executive coaching. (In the end, she was reassigned to another division.)

Mr. C was astonished to discover that all other employees in his U.S. office—every colleague and subordinate as well as the supervisor mentioned above, plus *her* supervisor—were female. This unusual turn of events understandably caused Mr. C stress, since in Japan it

remains true in most large businesses that women perform only menial roles. A more typical feature of U.S. business life that presented another hurdle for him was that, at the end of each day, everyone went home instead of out drinking, as do Japanese salarymen. He had come with his wife and child but expected to spend most evenings at bars with colleagues. He complained at one point that, since his coworkers never went out drinking, he couldn't figure out what *really* was going on at the office!

As in Ms. B's case above, so in Mr. C's: his performance began to slip due to a crushingly huge workload, not to mention cultural (and gender) differences. The reaction of his abrasive supervisor was more vicious in quantitative terms than we see in most Americans, but no different in qualitative terms: first, she blamed Mr. C for the problems that were arising, attributing his shortcomings to ignorance ("You don't know how to...") or apathy ("You didn't bother to..."), and finally ill-will ("You sabotaged..."). Second, she began assigning coworkers to assist and support Mr. C. (A directive had come down from on high that "Mr. C will not fail!") This reflects a common pattern of Americans: when things go wrong, they usually take the technical and personnel steps required to preserve productivity at all costs. As in the previous two cases, what was going wrong lay much more in the realm of value differences, relationship styles, and communication mismatches.

Communication mismatches often affect Americans and Japanese. In this case, the American supervisor assigned a great deal of work to Mr. C. That, in itself, is not a cross-cultural issue. It became a cross-cultural issue because, from

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Mr. C's perspective, she gave him insufficient information about the background and nature of the work and virtually no information at all about the preferred process for carrying it out. As a high context Japanese, Mr. C expected far more information than he was receiving. But as a face-conscious Japanese, he could not question his superior's abilities by saying "That's unrealistic," or "I don't understand what you mean."

A fascinating question arises here: what happens *in Japan* when a supervisor provides insufficient information while making an assignment? The face-preserving rules mentioned before apply in Japan, so the subordinate says, "Yes" and "I understand," just as Mr. C did in the U.S. But in Japan the subordinate has an escape opportunity because all his or her coworkers are highly contexted in what is going on at the office and throughout the company, enabling the subordinate to obtain the missing information from a wide range of others. That opportunity was largely absent for Mr. C in the low context U.S., where colleagues are well informed about their narrowly conceived projects and specialties but poorly informed about most other matters. The consequent inability of Mr. C to figure out what he was supposed to do and how he was expected to do it sapped his confidence as well as his actual ability to perform.

ANALYZING THE FAILURES

As we review these cases, we find three cross-cultural challenges that reduce performance and undermine trust when Asian assignees begin working with American colleagues in the U.S. These challenges, all of which subsume communication issues, are:

- Senior-junior relationships,
- Assumptions about learning, and
- Efforts to save "face."

Senior-junior relationships.

Asians deeply value harmonious relationships and the preservation of "face," and they assume that large social distances and power differentials separating senior and junior people are part of the natural order of things. Asians play these values out in business settings as follows: junior people expect to be taken care of and guided by senior people, whom the juniors view as very wise and knowledgeable. Therefore, the juniors are ready and willing, even eager, to be told what to do and how to do it, and they quiver at the thought that anyone might presume to question a senior's judgment. The seniors oblige by doing more or less as the juniors expect because, having been juniors themselves not so long ago, they know that this *modus operandi* works well for everyone (at least in Asia).

Americans deeply value accurate communication and individual self-reliance, and they assume that every human being, regardless of rank or station, is fundamentally the equal of every other. These values lead to certain results in business settings: junior people expect to be given opportunities to demonstrate their individual initiative and competence, and they expect to have opinions and ideas

and to express them openly—even to senior people. They believe that a junior person may question a senior's judgment. The seniors, or at least most of them, are open to being treated as near-equals because, of course, not so long ago they were treating *their* seniors as near-equals, and it worked. One outcome of these values is that people who are short on years but long on talent sometimes quickly move up to very high leadership positions in American firms, something extremely rare in Asia.

Assumptions about learning.

This challenge is a subset of the one above because it involves senior-junior relationships in an educational or training setting. Professors, teachers, facilitators, trainers—all are the people in the front of the room, the people in charge of the workshop or course. Asians see that person in the senior role, as a “master” who is wise and highly knowledgeable. Their expectations of that person are that he or she will guide the learning by giving explicit instructions about content *and* process. A senior's judgment and competence is never questioned because of face considerations and because the learner is viewing him- or herself as neither self-reliant nor responsible for the learning process.

Matters in the United States could hardly be more dissimilar. The professor or trainer is viewed by learners as a near-equal who may or may not be wise and competent and whose role is to set learning tasks and objectively measure learning (performance) outcomes, but not to provide close supervision about the “how” of learning. U.S. learners view themselves as self-reliant and expect that trial-and-error will be a part of their learning process, which in

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turn means that they might fail to get things right the first time round. But that is an acceptable possibility because, for Americans, the greatest good is self-reliance.

Another mismatch about learning that emerges from the case of Mr. A relates to the important cultural difference known as high context versus low context. Mr. A's high context superiors in Japan sent him to the States with learning objectives that seemed vague, insubstantial, and (the worst, perhaps) unmeasurable to the low context Americans, who proceeded to subject Mr. A to a barrage of narrowly conceived learning tasks. In fact, the Japanese viewed Mr. A's objectives in the broadest possible terms: to become highly contexted regarding American culture and business practices. That required Mr. A to reject the specific tasks set by his American trainer in favor of soaking up the “American way” by simply being among Americans in a wide variety of situations.

Ways of saving face. The irony about face-saving in our three cases is that we encountered both Asians and Americans who were doing their best to preserve the other side's face, but who nevertheless got it all wrong. This fact highlights how hard it is to be empathetic across cultures: it is almost impossible without an extensive and accurate understanding of the other person's cultural sensibilities. Someone who empathetically attempts to preserve another's face

does so by imagining how he himself would think and feel “in the other person's shoes.” But, across cultures, this is risky because the person *actually* attributes to the culturally different other the only values, feelings, and motives he or she (the empathizer) knows—his or her own. So, for example, we saw Ms. B and Mr. C both assume that their role as learner required them to never cause the manager to lose face by questioning the wisdom of their multiple assignments. Many American managers would have welcomed accurate input and feedback from their subordinates, enabling them to foresee and prevent a disaster.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

These cases and cultural analyses may make fascinating reading, but they have a practical use, too: they call attention to ways in which common problems affecting Asian expatriates and their U.S. colleagues can be avoided *before* they disrupt production cycles and undermine trust. Here are a few recommendations from those of us who sweep up the pieces left by Asian-U.S. culture clashes in American offices:

Learn the value underpinnings of the other's culture. Cross-cultural competence can never be achieved through learning a finite series of “do and don't” rules. Culture is nuanced in numerous complex ways as well as confounded by other types of human differences: gender, education, age, personality, and so forth. Culture by itself is one of the most powerful influences on how people think and behave. Taking the time to understand your counterpart's cultural values will pay off in the long run through wiser decisions and fewer debilitating cultural clashes.

Prepare both sides for the cross-cultural interaction. It is common for companies to obtain intercultural training for the people entering a new environment but not for the people who call that environment home. If anything emerges from our three cases, it's that this is a mistake. It was not only the Asians who were confused, under stress, and low on productivity; the Americans were equally so. It takes two sides to make a cultural clash; the geographic location of the clash is almost incidental. Coaching and training for cross-cultural interaction should focus on deepening awareness of value differences *and* on developing personal skills that facilitate effective communication and collaboration: listening, feedback, problem-solving, relationship building, and perhaps most critical, clarifying cultural assumptions. Both sides will benefit from

these types of training, *and the company will benefit the most.*

Do important planning face-to-face. If you're involved in planning staff exchanges or expatriate assignments with counterparts abroad, you are working on a big investment that could create enormous global potential for your firm. Meet with those counterparts face-to-face and do your planning together around the same table. Trust cannot be securely built in the absence of face-to-face relationships. And communication has its very best chance of being effective in these circumstances. For when you're around the same table for a couple of days, time is available to ensure that both sides fully understand the direct meaning and indirect implications of whatever is emerging as an agreement.

Slow down. Business being business, we're in a hurry: "Put that assignee to work right away. Don't

let the timetable slip!" We've all heard it a thousand times, but the old saying "Haste makes waste" definitely applies in these cases. It takes time for people to learn the ropes, to sense the subtle value differences, to develop trustful working relationships with strangers, to regain their competence and their confidence. If we could slow things down a mere *10 percent*, the organization's performance and production objectives would be attained, successfully and on time, much more frequently than they are when newcomers unrealistically are assumed to be able to "hit the ground running."

Human resources professionals who can carry out these steps will minimize the chances of ineffective assignments and crippling personal stress when Asian employees are sent to the United States and must work with American colleagues. ■