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FIVE HARD LESSONS IN GLOBAL TALENT MANAGEMENT

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The strategic management of an organization's human capital is a key component of a global mobility program, especially during the current economic duress facing much of the world. Gaydos provides five global talent lessons he has learned during his corporate career.

In the course of my 28 years in corporate life, I learned difficult lessons about global talent management, all of them coming out of mistakes. I hold certain beliefs about talent management with an unusual degree of zealotry because they still carry the sting of personal failure. I will not burden the reader with how I came to hold these beliefs, but will outline what I learned in the hopes of sparing others the necessity of making the same mistakes. After all, they have their own failings from which to learn.

Lesson One: Selection Trumps Development

This was such a difficult proposition for me to accept. I grew up in the world of individual and organizational development, and held the conviction that people can overcome almost any shortcoming given the right motivation and assistance.

Time and again I placed myself in the position of having to manage my

way through bad hiring decisions. I finally had to accept that it is impossible to train, develop, counsel, or performance appraise a person to acceptable execution of a job for which they were not suited from the beginning.

I also had to look myself in the mirror and admit that in trying to rescue the situation I was focusing on the wrong person: I should have been focusing on myself and my decision-making, not the individual I had put in the job.

This principle is particularly true for global talent management. Success in an international assignment depends on personal characteristics such as maturity, flexibility, and social intelligence.

In contrast, technical skills and prior international experience are poor predictors of success. In the international talent arena, 90 percent of success depends on selection (not training); 90 percent of selection depends on personal characteristics

(not content knowledge); and 90 percent of personal characteristics hinge on maturity and interpersonal skills.

These characteristics largely are immune to easy development and yet are central to success in international work. Thus, selection must take a central and primary role.

Lesson Two: Employees on a First International Assignment Almost Always Are Over Their Heads

The assignment is typically the most complicated and demanding they have ever held. They usually are operating at a higher organizational level, challenge enough in itself, but now must deal with heightened levels of ambiguity, greater need for integration across business units or countries, and the sudden requirement to influence people over whom they have no direct authority. All of this comes into play just at the time they are trying to help their families adjust to living in a new culture.

ON THE WEB

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION about global talent management, please visit www.WorldwideERC.org:

“Selection and Global Talent Management”

www.WorldwideERC.org/Resources/MOBILITYarticles/Pages/0509-kozloff.aspx

“The Global Mobility and Talent Management Partnership Opportunity”

www.WorldwideERC.org/Resources/MOBILITYarticles/Pages/1010-Sullivan.aspx

“Architecture of Strategic Talent Management”

www.WorldwideERC.org/Resources/MOBILITYarticles/Pages/1010-Foster-Herring.aspx

For years I operated under the rosy illusion that this fine young man or this intelligent young woman would slip smoothly into a new international role. Sadly, I saw that they typically were too inexperienced for the responsibility and had too much freedom, too much financial discretion, too much arbitrary power, and too little adult supervision.

Imagine now having made an especially poor selection—relying instead on technical background, cultural training, familiarization trips, language training, and a host of other “developmental” resources. The immature, self-centered, authoritarian know-it-all, regardless of the amount and type of development, is doomed even before arriving in country.

On the other hand, the person who has been screened properly and selected for the right personal characteristics typically has the right instincts to navigate the new and bewildering assignment. The well-selected individual asks thoughtful questions and listens carefully; values and builds on cultural differences; can articulate a business case that makes sense to a wide range of people; is skilled at enlisting the willing participation of professionals from

different disciplines; and is not afraid to ask for help. Such individuals are a joy to manage because they are so easy to manage.

Lesson Three: Typically There Is No Place To Go After the International Assignment

Many companies struggle mightily with repatriation of employees, but few if any have succeeded in doing an adequate job in a consistent and standardized way. It is not their fault. The very nature of an international assignment mitigates against the kind of repatriation programs we all dream about. There are three reasons:

1. Holding a key job open while waiting for an international assignment to end is very difficult and usually impossible from a practical standpoint.
2. The internal competition for desirable positions continues unabated regardless of who is returning from an international assignment.
3. The decision-makers may not know the person on an international assignment well, and probably had reduced opportunity while the person was out of the country.

I was longest in coming to recog-

nize that repatriation always would be, of its very nature, the most difficult aspect of building global talent. It is a problem that can be managed but never solved.

I had such a hard time accepting the reality because I did not want it to be true. The person who sacrifices and risks so much on an international assignment should be guaranteed a reward. It just did not seem fair that those who gave above the call of duty should be handicapped in competing for the next desirable position.

Now imagine again having made a poor selection decision, and how even more difficult it is to repatriate a person who either failed or struggled in the assignment. The best repatriation program is selecting individuals who have the highest chance for success from the beginning. Send people into international assignments who are competitive for promotion today, and there is a better than average chance they will be competitive after an international assignment.

Lesson Four: People on International Assignment Quickly Fall out of the Loop

I always was surprised at how quickly informal networks were lost to the person going to another country. The chance meeting in the hall, the dinner after the conference, the hallway chit chat, the whispered aside during a meeting—all of these small fibers of connective tissue to other people wither virtually within days.

What were solid and trusting relationships begin to age, cool, and go out-of-date. This is human nature and another problem to be managed but never solved.

Now the person on an international assignment has no reliable source of informal information. The infor-



mation that comes informally is the most valuable within an organization. It is typically framed in candid and colorful language that would never be permitted in a memo. It is timely and uncensored by layers of bureaucracy. It usually is highly accurate. Finally, and most important, the telling alone builds relationships.

So add the loss of relationship-based information to the pile of difficulties facing the international employee. And now again imagine having made a poor selection for the assignment.

The person unsuited for international work often will fall back on old habits in the absence of good information. The domineering supervisor will become even more domineering and controlling; the indecisive manager will take even longer to make simple decisions.

In general, undesirable characteristics grow more extreme in a vacuum; while positive characteristics also grow stronger and tend to shine more brightly. The adaptable and flexible individual will find new sources of information often better suited to the job at hand.

The best tactic, therefore, for man-

aging this drying up of informal channels of information is not a program or yet another set of formal communication vehicles. Rather, it is to select a person from the start who has the capacity for building new relationships and the insight to know what kinds of information are most useful to the job.

Yes, it all returns to Lesson One again.

Lesson Five: For the International Employee, the Rule is 'Out of Sight, Out of Affection.'

"Out of sight, out of mind" is easy enough to accept. But how many times has the employee or spouse on an international assignment issued this cry of the heart, "does anybody really care?" How many times has the expatriate employee or spouse complained of not getting personal attention?

The personal touch fades, and in its place appear e-mails, memos, voice-mails, policy manuals and, cruelest of all, utter silence.

Human nature is once again the reason for this condition. Support personnel and managers have a limited number of tools and even more limited time. Dealing with interna-

tional issues is exceedingly complex and time-consuming beyond imagination. It is inevitable, therefore, that interchanges across continents and time zones will grow somewhat formal and perhaps frosty at times.

Mercifully for the final time, imagine how a person with poor interpersonal skills will respond in such a situation. Blame, faultfinding, and personal attacks inevitably will enter into the conversation.

On the other hand, the person who is well suited to the complexities of international work will have lower expectations about getting personal attention. Such a person, I have learned, also will take the initiative and find a way to personalize the relationships that are important.

Selection is the all-important hub of global talent management. It is not the only important element, but is the necessary and enabling feature that makes the rest of the system operate to maximum efficiency. ■

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