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THE OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENT

As more and more companies recognize the importance of being competitive in the global marketplace, they also recognize the importance of acquiring experience in cross-cultural relationships.

To this end, a new breed of consultant has emerged, one that helps select and prepare personnel for overseas assignments. One of these, Barry D. Kozloff, president of Selection Research International, helps Monsanto employees understand and prepare for the unique and challenging experience that awaits them overseas.

"What I have in mind when I meet with the employee and his or her spouse," Kozloff explains, "is that not only will this be a new and stimulating work assignment, but also an opportunity for family members to have their lives enriched and broadened."

Kozloff bases his selection decisions on research gained on assignments from corporations around the world. Key qualities he searches for, he says, are an ability to adapt to change and sensitivity to the professional and emotional needs of others.

"What we hope to find," Kozloff explains, "is an ability to look beyond oneself and one's own interests. Obviously, the qualities of tolerance, a sense of humor and self-confidence help a lot."

Kozloff also meets with candidates and their families to help them decide if an overseas assignment is in their best interests. Once the decision is made, Kozloff says families on overseas assignments can expect their experience to follow a basic pattern.

"Everyone experiences a time of culture shock," Kozloff observes. "How long it lasts depends on the situation. What happens is that an imbalance is created by the removal of familiar routines and the accustomed sights and sounds of one's own culture."

"Soon each individual and the family as a whole reestablish a sense of balance, adjusts to the new culture and get on with the challenge of living in a new setting.

"Frequently, what follows is a period of exhilaration, which may be due to several factors. At work, the employee may find a greater sense of autonomy and self-reliance. The family may find what they took for granted in their home culture now requires more attention. And this has the effect of sharpening experience, making it more vivid.

"We often hear from those who have successfully completed overseas assignments that life seems to take on greater meaning, that friendships seem somehow deeper, that everyday experience is somehow intensified.

"The other thing that happens, of course, is that the family begins to learn about a new culture, to understand experience from a new perspective. Each family member's understanding of life is broadened, and each person's sense of self often is changed forever."

Inevitably, the overseas assignment comes to an end. The process then reverses itself. "We sometimes call it reentry shock," Kozloff explains. "And often it is the spouse and children who feel it the strongest, because they have had to make the greatest adjustments to begin with.

"Reentry shock may be accompanied by a sense of there not being enough time left, of there being more new challenges to take on, places to visit, friends to make. The experience of living in a new culture and seeing the world differently becomes so satisfying that giving it up can become difficult.

"Readjustment becomes complete," Kozloff explains, "as the employee and his or her family return to their native culture with a new sense of themselves intact, often with new friends to communicate with and new interests that invigorate their lives." □

he explains. "Otherwise you won't get the best return on your investment. If you treat your customer as a smart customer, he'll treat you as a smart supplier. This is fundamental. There has been a tendency in the United States to think of other traditions as inferior. But this, too, is changing. It is something none of us can afford.

"In a global marketplace, it is very important to respect, understand and appreciate all cultures. This can only be achieved if all parties are willing to be candid and open with each other. Remember, in a cross-cultural relationship, you have to understand both sides to make it work. We all must learn to understand the other's cultural traditions, not necessarily to follow them but to be able to be sensitive to what is implied by them."

Chiu thinks his most important role may lie in returning to

Asia as the overseas link in cross-cultural relationships. He feels very strongly about the value of tradition in Asian cultures. He and his wife, who is an American-born Chinese, speak Chinese at home and have been careful to educate their daughter, 11, and son, 7, in Asian ways and customs, returning to Hong Kong each summer for camp and educational activities. Chiu will no doubt be an active advocate in encouraging Asian colleagues to understand business situations from a non-Asian perspective.

"We all must learn that adding another perspective to our view of the world can no longer be seen as a burden, but can only be an asset," Chiu says. "As we continually invest more and more globally, especially in our human resources, we will see again and again that the net gain can be measured in much greater terms than just the money and products involved in global trade." ■