



## Establishing Yourself as a Leader at Work

Global leadership skills are becoming increasingly important to multinational organizations. They're vital to successfully manage and motivate culturally diverse workforces and develop relationships with suppliers, business partners and potential customers around the world.

One of the best ways for businesses to develop global leaders is through international assignments. But success abroad requires more than excellent professional skills. It requires cultural dexterity and resilience.

### Cultural Dexterity

Successful global leaders have the ability to quickly and easily adjust their management style to the specific business and cultural values and expectations of their new location – often from a collaborative approach to a more directive one or vice versa.

Many countries, including the USA, Canada, and those in Scandinavia favour egalitarian collaboration and teamwork. Individual initiative *is* encouraged, information and ideas are shared, feedback is ongoing and employees have ownership of their work. However, many other large economies, such as China, India, Russia and the UAE, have a more directive or autocratic management style whereby senior leaders make the decisions and then give instructions to their managers to pass on down the line. Employees would not think to show disrespect by questioning them or disturb the team by trying to stand out as individuals.

It can be difficult adjusting to a very different way of working and many expat managers often face the additional stress of being caught between the business expectations of their home office and those of their new location. For example, what are realistic deadlines for head office are often not realistic in a business culture that prioritizes relationship building. In these environments, expats must first prove to team members and business contacts alike that they are trustworthy, reliable and of the appropriate status.

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It can be challenging and frustrating when neither understands that what works for one does not necessarily work for the other. For expat managers, it's a balancing act requiring cultural dexterity.

### **Encouraging Feedback**

Global leaders also need to understand how colleagues from other cultures see their role and how they expect to be treated. In egalitarian organizations, employees feel free to present their ideas, debate issues in meetings and ask for more information. Speaking up is not only encouraged, it's expected. But that's not usually the case in cultures where there is a strong focus on consensus and/or a directive form of management is expected. Speaking up in a team can be seen as inappropriate and disrupting consensus while speaking up to a manager or leader can be perceived as disrespectful, and causing a loss of face.

The concept of Face, or public embarrassment, plays a particularly strong role in many Asian cultures. People will go to great lengths to save Face. They expect you to do the same. No employee wants to have an idea rejected by their supervisor in front of colleagues. At the same time, managers must be careful dealing with customers and people higher in the corporate structure. Causing them to lose Face can destroy relationships, reputations and even jobs.

### **Tips for Effective Global Communication**

- Learn about the cultures with which you will be communicating and working. Ideally this will be two-way process that allows all involved to understand each other's behaviours and so avoid unintentionally stereotyping, blaming or causing offense.
- When meeting with colleagues and customers from other cultures, avoid surprises and potential embarrassment, by collecting and then sharing agenda items in writing beforehand.
- Allow enough time. Some cultures have clocks and others have time. This can result in conflict between teams. On the one hand there will be the attitudes of "getting down to business," limited time for introductions, direct communication and a sense of urgency, while on the other there will be the need for relationship building and time for slow, thoughtful communication to reach consensus and avoid losing Face.
- Remember that people from many Asian countries are not being intentionally vague or unclear. Instead, they may be simply saving Face. In response to vague answers, ask gentle and polite questions. Pay attention to nonverbal communication such as silence and the order in which people speak.
- Some cultures consider it more efficient to be direct, even blunt, in their business communications. Don't be offended or defensive as no insult is intended. Your counterpart sees the goal of direct verbal communication as sharing information rather than building relationships. Even within this direct approach, European cultures tend to spend more time discussing process while North Americans tend to go straight to discussing desired outcomes.
- In egalitarian, collaborative business environments, feedback comes from brainstorming meetings where everyone offers suggestions and opinions. In cultures that do not encourage individuals to stand out, you can still elicit valuable feedback by providing people with the option of preparing responses beforehand with the help of written agenda. Or you can offer to review their written ideas afterwards. Outside of meetings meet with people one on one to building relationships and help everyone feel safe in offering feedback in meetings.

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- In a team with both direct and indirect communicators, setting up a team charter that includes rules of communication and protocols for meetings. This may help keep dominant speakers in check and encourage more reluctant employees to contribute.
- Develop a team of advisors who are familiar with both your culture and that of your new location. Ideally this includes an advisor who can also help your team understand the impact of cultural biases on both sides.

### The Link with Resilience

Successful international management and resilience go hand in hand. Research into resilience repeatedly identifies the same set of traits and skills, regardless of culture. These skills and traits not only help an expat handle the challenges of cultural adaptation, but also to successfully connect with and manage local contacts and staff.

- **Have a sense of purpose and long-term vision.** This allows you to put things into perspective, find guidance for action and decisions and separate the momentary stress and frustration from what really matters.
- **Flexibility and adaptability.** Resilient people are able to keep their eye on the goal while being flexible about how to reach it. This means adapting your behaviour, if not your values, to be effective in a different culture.
- **Create a strong support network.** The ability to create a social network and to build relationships not only provides you with local social supports, it also provides you the ability to build trust and effective relationships in with business contacts and staff.
- **Maintain a sense of humour.** Being able to laugh at yourself or the situation you're in helps keep things in perspective.
- **Learn from failure.** Be willing to take risks and learn from setbacks – what you did right, what you could have done better and what you will do next time. Resilient people have a great curiosity -- needed to understand and experience other cultures.
- **Willingness to seek help.** Resilient people know what resources are available and do not hesitate to use them to be effective. In the workplace, this can mean consulting with a mentor or taking a course. In your personal life it can include seeing your family doctor or initiating coaching and/or counselling from your Employee Assistance Program.

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