

## COACHING ACROSS BORDERS II

*By Meridian Resources*

In recent years, coaching has become a widely accepted means of helping executives of multinational organizations enhance their leadership skills. Due in large part to the success of this technique, a number of firms have begun to implement coaching programs in a broader set of locations around the world. In last month's issue of the *Global Skills Update* we examined issues related to establishing a coaching program abroad. In this issue, we look at some specific coaching strategies that we have found to be effective with different types of international employees.

### **Coachee Types:**

Although the coachees we have worked with have had an astonishingly diverse array of characteristics, they have also presented some common themes. Based on our experience over the past several years with Chinese, Japanese, and European coachees, here are: 1) several of the types that we encounter most often, 2) culturally-based issues that shape their experiences, and 3) potential ways to assist them in learning new behaviors.

#### ■ **The "Boss" Type:**

Many coachees come from more hierarchical cultures than that of their firm's home office. To put it bluntly, they are used to telling subordinates what to do and having their orders obeyed. Yet a key objective that they often have is to develop successors who can think for themselves and take on more independent responsibility for growing the business. In other words, these leaders need to serve as coaches themselves, drawing out the skills and abilities of their own subordinates. When leaders with this frame of mind encounter coaching for the first time, their typical reaction is, "But it's faster just to tell people what to do!" Or, they may impatiently try to "coach" for a few minutes and then quickly revert to lecture mode.

#### **Coaching Strategies:**

We find that with these kinds of leaders it is helpful to remind them of the rationale for coaching (see [Part One](#) of this series), and also to work with them to develop a more refined set of listening skills. These skills include: focus on the speaker, reflective listening, drawing out background information and explanations, defining options, and asking for commitment. We try to enable them to emphasize listening and other low-intervention management techniques such as feedback rather than leaping quickly to guidance or advice. In the long run many realize that it is more effective to ask a question that causes the other person to think deeply and respond than to launch into a well-meaning monologue that falls on deaf ears or, worse yet, produces subordinates who have to be told what to do.



### The "Dragon" Type:

Employees abroad who have had limited exposure to the organization's corporate culture may mistakenly conclude that it involves forms of behavior such as direct confrontation with colleagues or being extremely tough on subordinates, swinging to extremes uncharacteristic of their own cultural background. They themselves have gone through a trial by fire, so they believe others deserve to do so as well: "This is the way we do things here." These people may be unaware that the corporate models that they have witnessed are not necessarily representative of the whole, or that when they move to a different level in the company, more collegial, consultative behaviors are expected.

#### ***Coaching Strategies:***

With these individuals we ask first if they would be willing to speak with or observe other role models to check their definition of accepted corporate behaviors. Then, based on feedback gathered from interviews with colleagues and subordinates, we also try to hold up a mirror to them and ask if this is the way that they want to continue to lead and be perceived, or whether this style is still appropriate for them at their new level.

### The "Wallflower" Type:

High potential employees of global companies who favor a less direct communication style report that, "I try to contribute to the conference call but just can't catch the timing to get in," or "I start the meeting and am supposed to be the meeting owner, but then the participants just run away with it." Their foreign peers complain that they are not adding sufficient value or simply have not made a distinctive enough impression on headquarters colleagues to be recognized with a promotion to the next level.

#### ***Coaching Strategies:***

This kind of problem can stem in part from lack of English fluency, but it is more than a language issue, as there is also a culturally-based reluctance in many countries to appear overly aggressive or self-promoting. We ask coachees what they have done to try to control the flow of the conversation - often this can be

done with very simple English expressions. ("Please stop!" "Hold on." "Slow down.") We also ask them if they have held any one-on-one conversations with foreign colleagues to request their cooperation (for example, by identifying the speakers on the other end of a conference call and taking turns speaking). Or we might ask them whether as a starting point they would be willing to identify just one or two points that they are determined to make in the next meeting and then make these points regardless of whatever else happens.

### **The "Frustrated Change Agent" Type:**

This category often includes expatriates who have been sent to an overseas location with a mission to bring about change. Mid-career local hires who have been brought in recently from outside of the organization may experience these symptoms as well. The change agenda that they have carefully planned and upon which their own performance will be judged appears to be stalled. Employees whose cooperation is essential seem unable or unwilling to take on the new agenda and make it happen. Frustrated change agents are frequently ready to burst with anger and impatience and to fire half the people in the office, emotions which only guarantee further ostracism from their colleagues.

#### ***Coaching Strategies:***

The frustrated change agent is moving at a pace that is sensible to him or her, but has failed to fully engage and gain buy-in from local colleagues. We ask such individuals how they might obtain greater buy-in, and they frequently come back with excellent ideas about how to proceed. A question that startles some is, "What is the local organization doing right that deserves to be preserved?" In most cases they need to wage a "listening campaign" throughout the office that makes them a better-known presence rather than a foreign threat. This allows them to incorporate good ideas from others and identify the specific sources of resistance that they will need to work with further.

### **Lessons Learned**

The key lesson for those implementing coaching programs around the world is that coaching does not need to be reinvented in every new overseas location or with each new coachee. Instead, managers need to recognize some of the common challenges faced by coachees, to consider the culture-based issues that influence a coachee's behavior in a specific country, develop strategies that are successful with each type, then transfer this knowledge to future coaches. Our experience has been that coaching is a very transferable management technique, as long as the coachee's cultural assumptions are considered when developing a coaching strategy.

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