

# establishing a successful platform for expatriate success

By Michael Thompson

“Are you from Texas?” I heard a familiar voice ask my youngest son.

I turned to find myself face-to-face with a former client from a Big Four consulting firm in the United States. I was with my family at Shanghai’s Pudong International Airport waiting to board a flight to Hong Kong and my former client was apparently waiting for the same flight.

“What are you doing here, Michael?” he now asked of me.

“I’m moving the family to Shanghai,” I replied.

“Me too,” he said.

I am amazed at the number of “me toos” in China today. Anyone who has arrived China in the last eighteen months will, like me, be surprised at the number of expatriates flooding into the world’s most populous nation.

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Having already lived abroad serving world-class consulting firms in Western Europe and South Africa, I have closely observed the challenges faced by expatriate executives plunged into new social and corporate cultures. The transition is rarely smooth. When driving change in Asia, for example, what many new expatriate managers first perceive as consensus-driven decisions will be puzzled to find those decisions questioned by employees months later. While the model of the autocratic foreign boss has now been trumped by the culturally sensitive manager focused on people, this empathy-based approach can often turn out to be just as fatal to success.

But it is seldom so cut and dried. Empathy and situational awareness are still essential for success. Patrick Litre is Chief Executive Officer of Conner Partners, a consulting firm that helps organizations with transformational change. Now based in Atlanta, Litre is a Frenchman who spent 13 years as an expatriate in six Asian countries.

“For expatriates,” Litre says, “the ability to empathize and have a lot of situational awareness is critical. Some people are very good at gauging the environment and adjusting in real time. This is the skill set that helps you be effective faster in an environment where many things are different. You have to be sensitive to the signals people are sending regardless of language: this allows you to ramp up your learning curve much faster, and anticipate likely outcomes of your decisions.”

The most successful leaders abroad demonstrate this listening capacity Litre alludes to and make the best decisions possible with the information at hand. As an expatriate leader, building a platform that consists of the right components is essential to overcoming the challenges of being an outsider. The right platform will yield the trust required to be sufficiently assertive with the team, some of whom may view the expatriate manager as an interloper who stepped into the position they coveted. Trust and confidence need a platform consisting of the right environment, processes, measurements and the right team of people.

A key step to inspiring those whom the expatriate leader has been sent to “lead” is to create a trusting environment that fosters open, honest communication. Embrace bearers of bad news and encourage people to warn you about issues before they become problems. The earlier you recognize when things aren’t working, the better your chances of sorting them out before the consequences

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become dire. Trust, however, can not be mandated; it must be carefully cultivated from day one.

“In Asia, trust takes on a higher meaning than just in the commercial, business connotation,” says Richard Chang, President of Perot Systems Consulting in Shanghai. Educated in Taiwan and the US, Chang has experienced culture shock on both sides of the Pacific. In his 18 years with Perot Systems he has been relocated six times.

“Asian business is still very relationship driven,” Chang says. “The more established in terms of length and depth a relationship is, the more trust and confidence your people will demonstrate when striving for common goals. Who would you trust more? Someone in your family, or a stranger from a foreign country?”

Chang stresses that it is essential to “earn” trust in Asia, as opposed to “winning” or “capturing” it. He also warns that there are many cultural norms the expatriate manager must be aware of. “Asians tend to dislike direct conflict or confrontation, particularly with their managers,” he says. “One way to earn trust and confidence is to know when to confront, and when not to. Perhaps more important is knowing how to structure the discussion so both parties can walk away with ‘face.’ In many Asian cultures ‘saving face’ is crucially important for the individual. ‘Losing face’ is something that simply cannot be forgotten, and team members and leaders alike prefer to leave an organization if they felt they have lost face. In Asia, face is a form of mutual respect and the foundation of trust.”

So, you’ve been assigned to an expatriate posting. Now what?

Upon arrival, carefully consider the measurements or key performance indicators (KPIs) of your team. With more and more non-multi-nationals striving to gain ground in booming markets like China, India, and Brazil, it is important to consider that smaller companies tend to be subjective in how people are rewarded. To be a successful leader in a foreign domain, it is necessary to introduce objective measurements. Otherwise, you can’t create a culture where people will want to work.

“KPIs are important anywhere, but are particularly important for a new expatriate manager,” Litre says. “A new expatriate has to adjust to a new environment and many reference points are blurred. There are so many things

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to adjust to, so objective KPIs at least establish a stable framework although everything else in the manager's world is changing.”

When hiring employees avoid focusing solely on technical skills, but consider other attributes candidates possess and if these attributes satisfy core needs. For example, how does he or she fit into the environment you're trying to create? And what sort of relationships will he bring to the table? Those relationships could play a significant role in overall success. These, or other, selection criteria may prove critical to securing people who are not only competent but compatible with the team. Finally, seek out external perspectives from those with a long history operating in the market. These peers can be invaluable to helping you make the right people decisions in a new environment.

As my former client – now friend – and I boarded our plane to Hong Kong, we found we were considering residing in the same Shanghai community. We were delighted that our spouses would have each other to consult through the months to come.

But we also agreed on the fundamental truth that a true multi-national perspective can only be achieved through living and working far from one's home country.

Clearly, the inevitable moments of discomfort and home-sickness would be eclipsed by the epiphanies that come from experiencing the world through the eyes, ears and emotions of those who have so graciously welcomed us into their culture.

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*Michael Thompson, Managing Partner with Heidrick & Struggles China, focuses on the recruiting requirements of technology-centric organizations and professional services firms. He conducts functional searches across general management, strategy, product development, business development and information systems functions.*

*Michael was previously with Gemini Consulting, where he focused on strategic market development, sales force effectiveness and customer care consulting. He began his career with Procter & Gamble, where he held sales and marketing roles. Michael can be reached at +86 (21) 6136 1988 or [mthompson@heidrick.com](mailto:mthompson@heidrick.com).*