



# Successful Expatriate Management :

Prof SATTAR BAWANY explores  
Transition Coaching for successful  
global assignments.

Executives are challenged to rapidly adjust their leadership styles and family life to a global environment, new cultures, and a greater variety of assignment types. In this article DBM explains how transition coaching can improve assignment success rates, return on investment, employee satisfaction and retention, and contribute to smoother repatriation.

The best approach for corporations supporting executives on global assignments of all types is to address both the shift from one culture to another on long-term assignments and train everyone at a managerial level in an open-minded, culturally respectful mindset that values diversity.

Executives going on assignment in another culture need to be aware of their own cultural background. The best preparation for any identity shock, of which culture shock is one type, is to know oneself well. This allows an executive to remain steady under pressure from external influences and provides the strength to be flexible.

Leaders also need to know something about the culture of the nation to which they are moving. The fit between the executive (regardless of cultural background and personality type) and the new culture, should be evaluated to determine the likelihood that the executive will or will not be satisfied and effective in the assignment.

Likewise, their families should be part of the “fit” assessment, especially since a significant number of assignments are prematurely terminated, as a result of family and spousal adjustment problems.

Successful assignment management involves assigning executives whose cross-cultural abilities match their technical expertise. Other key elements include focusing on knowledge development and global

leadership development, and ending expatriate assignments with a strategically planned repatriation program to increase employee retention.

All high-level managers in global companies encounter colleagues, clients, and geographically dispersed team members from other cultures. Therefore, everyone must know something about cultural diversity and how to work well with people from all kinds of backgrounds.

The assumption that the American way of doing business is the standard, was never valid. But in a global economy, this misconception is dangerous to a company’s return on investment. For instance, a hard-hitting, direct negotiating style can boomerang in Asia. With a sizable majority of companies that have employees with international job responsibilities, training leaders to interact effectively and respectfully with people of different cultures is one of the best investments a company can make.

### LONG-TERM ASSIGNMENT ALTERNATIVES

Various research on key assignment trends noted that traditional long-term assignments will be used under certain circumstances in the future, particularly when there is a need to develop business relationships or establish a permanent presence for supervising local operations.

Long-term assignments will also continue to be useful when the job to be accomplished takes longer than a year, or when the purpose of the assignment is to encourage an understanding of global corporate culture. Relocation of the family unit remains the best choice when the assignment is in a distant location, as there is





a significant time zone differential from the home company, and commuting would be disruptive and costly.

An executive coach familiar with different assignment types can assist companies in reviewing their overall profile. Coaches can assess the effectiveness of assignment-type mix and suggest specific ways of approaching all assignments. In doing so, they give management the keys to maximise executive performance and increase the likelihood of a good return on investment for their corporation.

Each company should take a big-picture overview. Subsequently, the management must determine whether it needs to improve the overall mix for heightened success and better returns.

#### **COMBINED APPROACH ENSURES SUCCESS**

In all cases, there is a need for leadership development and family adjustment support that takes account of global scope, cross-cultural and political awareness, and the ability to work successfully in new managerial configurations. Specific, ongoing needs must be taken into account—something that time-limited training alone, whether individualized or general, cannot accomplish.

Picture an executive who attends off-site training, gains wonderful insights and impressive experiences, only to return to work where the pressures of daily business erode the learning or, at least, push it out of immediate consciousness. Next, transfer this scenario to the global scene. Place that same executive in a completely new culture and ask him or her to retain what was learned before he or she and the family packed up and crossed a few time zones!

Ongoing individualised coaching is now a proven method of leadership development for executives. Transition coaching is valuable whether used alone or as a follow-up to training.

Whether preparing executives and their families for the three major stages of a long-term assignment (pre-departure assessment and preparation, initial immersion in the host culture, and repatriation) or for alternative assignments, transition coaching might ensure that

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both the executive and the business goal move forward in such a way that employee satisfaction, successful performance, and assignment completion are maximized. Effective transition coaching also ensures that employee retention remains high.

Unlike a consultant who analyses and provides solutions, a coach delves into the clients’ needs to develop the best solutions for an enriching learning experience. In global coaching, the coach may also impart important information about international business practices or coach the executive in how to find it. The focus is on present and future action moving forward a client-determined agenda. The transition to a new culture or learning how to lead a geographically dispersed team are situations in which coaching becomes the difference between just getting by and excelling.

Transition coaching, proven to increase the effectiveness of training four-fold, is a cost-effective way to customize and continue leadership development while the leader is abroad, dramatically increasing assignment success and employee retention.

Working with an experienced global executive coach, an executive can retain the same edge as colleagues at home while gaining valuable international experience. The executive can tailor developmental support to the specific international situation and ensure that his or her performance level stays high while working in an unfamiliar environment. The globally savvy coach can work with the strengths of the client and address developmental needs on the spot in real time.

Considering the benefits in terms of assignment success and employee retention, pairing an employee with a coach is a fiscally

sound investment. A recent study shows that the use of executive coaches saved companies nearly six times the amount spent. Coaching can take place by phone or Internet, eliminating the need to be in the same location and allowing the coach to work with the executive and their families throughout all assignment phases. Global coaches work with clients all over the world, so they have the big picture in mind all the time and easily can apply what they learn from one situation to another, while maintaining essential confidentiality. Each client benefits from the coach's breadth of experience.

Changing behavior, especially for an executive, who lives in a fishbowl of demands and expectations, requires both the information, insight, and one-time experience of training, and also ongoing support and application to daily work with feedback from a trusted source over a period of time. Even with motivation, letting go of old behaviors and adopting new ones, takes time and



attention. The globally trained executive coach provides confidential and reliable support and acts as an honest source of feedback for ongoing improvement.

While most executive coaches are trained to assess and bring out the strengths and developmental needs of company leaders, global executive coaches bring a broader and deeper skill sets. Not only do they develop leadership skills such as strategic thinking

and planning, improved decision-making, and team leadership, they are also skilled in supporting executives in developing global literacy and adaptability and meeting global leadership challenges.

#### DO NOT IGNORE REPATRIATION

Unfortunately, repatriation is a crucial stage in long-term assignment management that is often ignored or poorly done.

Frequently, a leader with expanded skills and a global network flounders or takes flight for another company. It is all too common



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for an employee to become part of the competition’s expertise after the company invested substantially in the assignment.

A handful of companies have a good track record for successful assignment and executive retention. Those companies use international assignments as research opportunities, with carefully planned post-assignment policies and repatriation.

Upon their return, the global executive has acquired a different set of skills than the ordinary executive working within one culture, and these are crucial to the company’s global success. For both the

executive and the company, the acquisition of a new mindset and capabilities must be recognized and used.

Career management planning should begin before the assignment starts. Planning how to stay in touch, scheduling regular visits and check-ins with the human resource department and trusted colleagues, and establishing a way to stay current with leadership development and personnel changes are all key in staying in the information loop. Regular visits and reports on assignment activities ensure that the executive is considered part of the company’s leadership team. Being included in corporation leadership meetings is also crucial.

Back home, the executive needs assistance and support from both a coach and HR to determine how best to make use of new skills and global networks. A repatriated executive can become a valuable asset for reassignment in another culture, for training and mentoring new assignees, and for strategic input on long-range planning.

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