



Case Study

Lessons from Fred Bailey's Expatriate Experience in Japan: Proactively Preparing Employees for International Assignments

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Abstract

The article highlights the experience of an American manager transferred to work in Japan. The manager finds the social and business culture of Tokyo to be very different from his home country. The experience becomes so frustrating as to make him and his wife consider giving up and going back to the United States. The article offers an important case study for exploration of factors that impact effective international assignments. The article shines the light on the need for training that incorporates cultural awareness and effective business practices. The intended contribution of this article is to summarize the case and outline the international human resources practices of the firm and how they can proactively improve things for future expatriates. It examines the problem the expatriate and his family are facing and provides suggested alternatives and an implementation plan as to how the issue can be resolved.

Key words: Expatriates, international assignments, Japan expatriate family, cross-cultural training.

The Fred Bailey¹ Case of Going to Japan!

With offices in nine countries worldwide, Kline & Associates is a rather large multinational consulting firm. With the opening of a new location in Tokyo, Fred Bailey found

¹ This case is based on the following article: Black, J. S. (1996). Fred bailey: An innocent abroad. In M.E. Mendenhall, G.R. Oddou, & G. K. Stahl (Eds.), *Readings and cases in international human resource management*. (4th ed., pp. 163-170). New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

himself assigned to a three-year assignment as the director of Kline & Associates' Tokyo office. It was just six months ago when Fred arrived in Japan with his wife and two children excited about the assignment. Now he is confused as to how things turned around so abruptly. He is debating whether he should return home or persuade his wife to stay and finish out the assignment (Black, 1996, p. 163). Of course, research demonstrates that expatriates who are returning home tend to face an uncertain future and stressful challenges (Alvarado, Antoine, Cinquetti, Fernandez, Najair, Scagliotti, and Mujtaba, 2010). As such, repatriation training and program can help in this transition.

Before arriving in Tokyo seven months ago, Fred Bailey had just successfully finished a major project with his team when he went to lunch with the managing partner, Dave Steiner, of the main office in Boston. The meeting was about a huge promotion and career move that would take Fred's career with Kline to the next level if completed successfully; he would become a partner in the firm. Half a year into his assignment, Fred knew he could not go back on the offer as it would be the death of his career with Kline. However, his wife, Jenny, made it clear that she hated being in Japan. She strongly believed that Fred and the company had oversold the country and how well they would be taken care of, and didn't like the fact that Fred was never home due to 80+ hour work weeks. After just six months, Jenny had given Fred an ultimatum: either they return home together or she would go home alone. This was a tough decision as Fred had to decide what was more important, his family or his career (Black, pp. 163-164).

Fred and Jenny started dating only a week after they met during their senior year in college and eventually got married. Jenny was born into a well to do family in Connecticut and majored in fashion merchandising as she had an interest and talent for fashion. Fred, the oldest of six children, came from a not so wealthy family and was the first to go to college. Although they struggled financially to put him through school, Fred was determined to take advantage of his opportunity and make his parents proud. Before and after the couple got married, they expressed their feelings about careers and family. Fred's goals were to get his masters of business administration degree after a few years of work. Jenny wanted to be a buyer for a major store and have her own shop. They both wanted children and thought it would be best to start a family once Fred graduated from college. Everything was going as planned until Fred got the offer to go to Japan (Black, p. 164).

The Offer

Upon his completion at Harvard, Fred joined Kline and was put on the San Francisco team. After four years of successful projects at Kline, the managing partner at Kline, Dave Steiner, offered him a big promotion that came with a career opportunity to be partner if he triumphs in a three-year overseas assignment as director of the new Tokyo office. That office had a strategic importance for the company because it served major US clients' operations in Japan. George Woodward, the previous assignee only lasted a year and then was transferred to the UK office because of his mixed reputation. Since he left the position suddenly, Fred was rushed to accept the assignment, convince his wife, and be ready to move in a matter of three weeks (Black, p. 165).

When Fred went home to reveal the wonderful news to his wife, he was shocked at her less than excited response. Jenny thought the move to Japan would be difficult on the kids as they would have to live and go to school in a foreign country. In addition, she was not enthusiastic about not being able to open her own clothing store as planned. However, Fred assured

her that the offer was too good to turn down and the company's overseas package would make the living conditions in Japan great. The company offered to pay all expenses such as travel, relocation, housing, children schooling, private transportation with driver, and a cost of living adjustment, and compensation that would double Fred's annual income. At the end, Fred spent only two days to consider and told Mr. Steiner that he would accept the assignment. This was a big decision for Fred and his family (Black, p. 165).

Preparing for the Move

With the whole process of making the transition from Boston to Japan and getting someone situated to take over Fred's current position, Fred and the family had little time to really research and learn much about Japan. Due to the fact that much of the logistics was being handled by Kline internally, some of Bailey's things were misplaced in wrong locations and to make matters worse, they were offered a small living arrangement that could not hold or fit many of their belongings (Black, p. 166).

Once in Tokyo, after a few days of just settling in, Fred was back to work at the new Tokyo office. His first line of business was to conduct a general meeting with all his employees. During the meeting, all the Japanese staff sat together and all the American staff sat together, but this was not recognized by Fred. He just introduced himself and presented his business plan and asked a group of Americans their opinion about it and he got a mixture of opinions. On the other hand, Fred could not get much of a response from the Japanese group and they just made sucking sounds when he asked for specific information. Surprised at the reaction he got and aware that he was not getting far with the meeting, Fred thanked everyone for coming and closed out the meeting. At home, his wife had her own problems of not being able to buy certain goods without paying four times the amount back home and not having anyone to talk to since Fred worked long hours. Things were really getting to her by now and she did not know what to do (Black, p. 166).

Preoccupied with thinking about his meeting with a potential Japanese client, Fred could not pay attention to his wife's concerns. Fred's first meeting with a significant prospective client was not effective as he thought it would be. He used the American way to try to get a deal with the prospect, but it did not work. He went straight to the point and did not try to establish a relationship with the prospect before trying to get a deal. On top of that, he was trying to rush a decision from the Japanese side without giving them time to consider the offer. After five months of negotiations, Fred could not obtain the response he was looking for from the client. To help develop a report on the client so the proposal can be reevaluated and adjusted where necessary, Fred and Ralph Webster, a senior American associate, involved a Japanese research associate, Tashiro Watanabe, who would take the lead on the report since he understood the Japanese language and culture (Black, p. 167).

Although this move was to create a better position for Fred with the client, the relationship between Fred and Tashiro was one with no effective communication and understanding. With word that the report was not completed, Fred was frustrated because he did not know why Tashiro never said anything. With the disconnection between the groups over the unfinished report, everything was left unfinished, and they were uncomfortable with each other and things got worse from thereafter. These incidents on top of others that Fred was too tired to remember just made him discouraged and he felt like he was doing business with people from another planet (Black, p.168).

At the beginning, Jenny was determined to make the move to Japan and it would be filled with adventure. However, it did not take long before her experience in Japan became one filled with equal frustration as Fred's. She was tired of not fitting in and not being able to read or understand the language. After a matter of months, with all the frustration built up inside on top of the incidents and challenges that came with the move, Jenny was more eager than ever before to leave Japan for good. On top of that, Jenny felt like they did not owe the company anything as she believed that Kline had misled them to think that this assignment was similar to the one Fred took in San Francisco for two years; however, it was far from it and now she was ready to give Fred an ultimatum: either they leave together or she leaves alone (Black, pp. 168-169).

Fred reflected back on the past seven months of his assignment and wondered why everything was about to collapse. He wanted to know what had gone wrong. Thoughts ran through his head as to how he could resolve his problem. Should he contact his boss and discuss his situation? Should he return home with his wife and children? Or could he try to fix the problem so he can finish out the assignment and return back home to the United States?

The Challenges of International Assignments

The case clearly demonstrates that Fred was not prepared to deal with the changes he faced in Japan. He was not familiar with the basic differences between the two cultures and did not have practical strategies for how to handle the differences. Fred made several mistaken assumptions. He assumed that Japan was just like America, in that people had the same motivations and employed the same strategies and behaviors when conducting business. Clearly, the company did not provide him with the appropriate training that should have taught him about proper modes of behavior in a different country. They did well at selling Fred and his wife the idea of a move that would be easy and comfortable for all. They also did their best to handle things internally for the family as far as the move was concerned.

However, they did not prepare Fred or his family for the "culture shock" they would most likely face when in Japan. They also did not make decisions for their personal situation and just gave them general benefits that did not cater to their specific needs. The HR managers of the firm should have offered pre-departure training programs for their expatriates working overseas on long-term international assignments and their families to allow for their transition to be one of completion and success. The training for individuals that are exposed to a different culture should focus on several key components. Some of these components were clearly evident in Fred's case, such as the importance of context, the focus on individual versus community, and the role of social connectedness in a business environment.

High or low context refers to the role of the environment in social interactions. The United States is a low context culture, which means that the environment of the interaction (i.e. how the interaction occurs) is of little consequence; the focus instead is on the issue discussed. Japan, on the other hand, is a high context culture (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 101). The issue discussed fades in comparison to how it is handled. Putting a person on the spot is not a good business practice. Yelling at an employee in front of others makes him or her "lose face," which is very destructive to business relationships. Fred's expectation that his Japanese associate would inform him if something was going wrong, and the way that Fred interacted with Tashiro, shows that he was completely unaware of the way that business communications occur within a high context culture. John Maynard had a better idea, talking to Tashiro in a bar in a neutral and

friendly environment. Tashiro opened up within a context of a friendly conversation, but would not admit his failure within the context of a supervisor-employee communication.

The United States is a highly individual-oriented culture. People are expected to make their own decisions, and those decisions are expected to be in the best interest of the individual and his/her close family (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 143). Japan, however, is a community-oriented culture. In it, community or group interests take precedence over the rights of individuals. People's loyalty in Japan lays more with the group than with an individual. In fact, individual interests and preferences may be routinely overlooked if it is in the highest interest of the group (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 144). In America, when the supervisor singles someone out and asks for his/her individual opinion, it might be considered an honor. In Japan, however, it might cause people a sense of embarrassment because it would appear to put the individual employee above the group. Fred made this mistake several times. First, when he asked people during the first staff meeting for their individual opinions on how to improve things, and second, when he asked Tashiro "what he thought" about the important task being assigned to him individually. To handle the situation differently, Fred should have invited the group as a whole to discuss ideas and come up with a unified group vision.

Personal or impersonal refers to the importance of relationship-building in business interactions. The United States considers business to be impersonal. In fact, people often use a phrase that clearly expresses that sentiment, "it's not personal; it's business." Business is often conducted without concern for personal feelings or preferences of those involved. In Japan, however, business success is a function of the degree to which interpersonal relationships are developed. In other words, people's comfort during the business dealings is important to the success of the business (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 337). Fred's approach to his new employees was very impersonal. He expected the employees to be engaged simply because the company expected it.

What he should have done, however, was to establish warm relationships with his coworkers. In Japan, employees interact with each other socially outside of the office and these relationships are taken into account when making professional decisions. In fact, many business decisions are routinely made within social contexts. Fred had to maintain authority, yet create a relationship that would unite all staff. If Fred was aware of the business culture in Japan and had proper training from his firm's HR department, he would not have made many of the decisions he did and would have had a different approach to handling business abroad. Also, the training would have eliminated from the challenge of being faced with his dilemma.

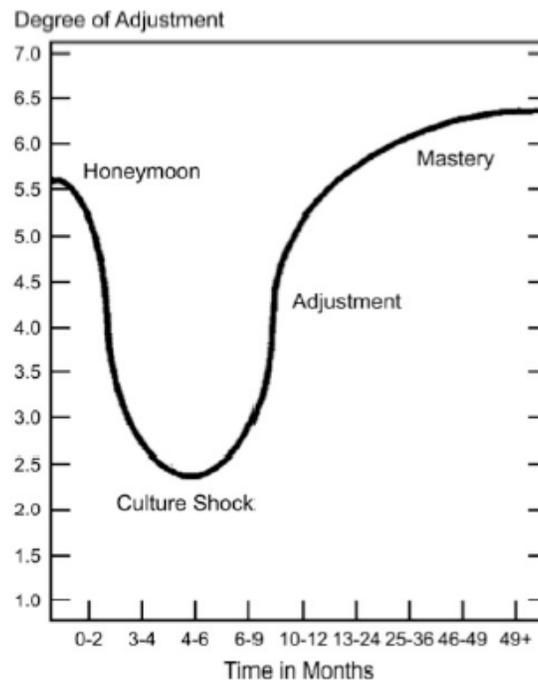
Phases of Cultural Adjustment

The U-curve, as presented in Figure 1, is the most often used model that explains the adjustment process that Fred Bailey is experiencing. According to Dowling et al. (2009), the adjustment process consists of four stages (honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery), with each stage lasting between several months to several years (p. 117). The culture shock phase is part of a normal process that the majority of expatriates experience, which explains the dissatisfaction, confusion, and stress level faced by the American family six months after they moved to Japan.

The main adjustment problem for Fred was the fact that the HR department of the Kline & Associates' firm failed at addressing the anticipated problems and taking appropriate steps to get Fred and his family prepared for the move to Japan. Also to make things worse, Fred did not

do his own research of the Japanese business culture for his own understanding. As a result, Fred did not get the proper training he needed to attain cross-cultural knowledge, effective communication, be aware of personality stereotyping, and make strategic business decisions (Cheerla, 2010, para. 2). With the need for Fred to make a quick decision about his acceptance of the new offer, the HR managers did not give him the necessary time he needed to come to grasps of what he was about to get himself in. In this case, Fred was naïve about the offer and was swallowed up by the nice picture the company painted in his head of the move to Japan, thus putting his family in a vulnerable situation. However, the company did not equip him with the level of cultural awareness needed to meet the challenges and issues he would possibly face.

Figure 1- Phases of Cultural Adjustment



Graphic Source: H. De Cieri, P. J. Dowling and K.L. Taylor, “The Psychological Impact of Expatriate Relocation on Partners,” *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, Vol. 2, 1991, p. 380.

The problem faced by Kline & Associates presents a large opportunity for the company to turn around its IHRM practices and implement a training program that will be beneficial for their expatriates on international assignments. The opportunity is present to rework the HR management structure; equip expatriates with fundamental knowledge and skills; return a sense of encouragement to those that have not had successful experiences in the past; and more importantly, get HR managers more involved in their employees’ lives. The program should be constructed to meet the challenges and problems that will mostly likely be presented in these situations. As for Fred, knowledge of the cultural differences in Japan will help him create a better living and working environment for him and his family.

Possible Solutions to the Main Problem

To be able to stay competitive in the global and aggressive market environment of today, organizations have to consider the importance of international human resource management (IHRM) training and preparation. One of the most important fields within IHRM is the management of expatriate pre-departure training. **It is clear that according to expatriates, pre-departure cross-cultural training is relevant and this could be an important part of the solution for Fred's problems. But although Fred Bailey** was working for a multinational corporation, neither he nor his wife ever received pre-departure training, which was their main problem. This goes against most studies done on the effectiveness of pre-departure cross-cultural training, but Kline & Associates did not provide pre-departure training. A reason why the company did not provide training to Fred might be that he was successful on previous local assignments. The company then could have decided that it was not necessary for him to have pre-departure training.

The training elements that were found to be most important to Fred as an expatriate manager of Tokyo's office are classified in two parts. First of all, the HRM at Kline & Associates could have been involved actively on pre-departure cross-cultural training before Fred moved to Tokyo. The second scenario is the problems Fred currently faces in Tokyo. In this case, Fred must turn the situation around and undertake this challenge and work hard to resolve the critical problems at the office and at home. The following are possible solutions to both scenarios presented for Fred Bailey.

Pre-departure Cross-Cultural Training

Since Fred lacked any exposure to cultural diversity, his point of view on cultural dimensions was in direct conflict with the Japanese and he had no idea about it. Fred was unfit to handle a culturally dissimilar group of individuals (Cheerla, 2010). Thus, the HR department could provide Fred a pre-departure cross-cultural training that includes culture, negotiation, attribution, behavior, and language training.

- Kline & Associates should not ignore language training because using the host country's language has a positive influence on expatriate adjustment and facilitates cooperation of the employees.
- Fred must have done training on negotiations and dealing with Japanese businesses. This could have helped him understand the customers' needs and values (Cheerla, 2010).
- Fred should have understood the cultural dimensions such as relationship, power, space, and time orientation, and how his principles fit or differ with those of the Japanese (Cheerla, 2010).
- *Other pre-research.* Fred must have done a full investigation of economic, cultural, political, and technological issues to be ready to the challenges with global projects.
- Fred could have helped his wife to find a job in Tokyo so that she could feel productive.

If Fred was not prepared for this challenge, he could have postponed his relocation date until he felt ready for the move. During this time, he could have planned, prepared, researched, and learned about the Japanese culture and ways to do business. Also, he could have learned about language interpretation, grocery shopping, and other general activities that he could use to help his wife and family have a better experience while in Japan (Cheerla, 2010).

Fred's Current Situation in Tokyo

Since this assignment is a big career opportunity for Fred, but Fred left the United States without orientation or understanding of the Japanese culture, he felt stressed because he could not communicate and understand his Japanese employees and clients. Anyway, he still can change his position and try to recuperate this assignment by doing the following personal and managerial changes (Cheerla, 2010).

- Fred should respect the cultural differences within the office so he can build a system and a working atmosphere that promotes cultural diversity.
- Since the Japanese are relationship oriented, he should break the hierarchical management style and focus on relationship building (Cheerla, 2010).
- Since the Japanese people prefer uncertainty avoidance, he should reduce uncertainty in the tasks for employees and their responsibilities (Cheerla, 2010).
- He should involve his team in the creation of the office's goals, so everybody can see that he is aware of the cultural differences in the office.
- He should create channels of communication, release control and ask for feedback from employees. Also, he can share business values with Japanese clients and keep harmony instead of confrontation (Cheerla, 2010).
- Fred should employ a language specialist who can train both him and his wife on Japanese language, traditions and behaviors.

Since Fred's present problems are happening due to his lack of cultural knowledge and excess in task-orientation and not relationship building, the solutions mentioned above will improve his communication skills with Japanese employees and clients, managerial tactics, and social and family relationships.

Implementation Plan and Steps

International assignments do assist in knowledge sharing and competence transfer, and encourage adoption of common work practices, aspects of which may comprise elements of corporate culture. Staff in the various organizational units may be exposed to different viewpoints and perspectives that will shape their behavior and may reinforce their feelings of belonging (Dowling et al., 2009, p. 93). The opportunity of director of Kline and Associates' Tokyo office that was given to Fred Bailey was proposed too fast and his drive and eager ambition led to a possible disappointment. The international assignment was a traditional long-term assignment for three years and needed an implementation plan. Before making this quick decision, Fred needed to consider many factors that will not only affect him but his family's lives.

Kline and Associates needed Fred to replace George Woodward who was a partner that headed the operations in Japan. George suddenly had been transferred to the UK and his position needed to be filled within three weeks. Fred did not know the reason for transfer, but was aware that George had a mixed reputation of having friends at the very top of Kline and along with some enemies. This situation alone needed to be assessed before the consideration. Fred's vision was filled with the possibility of becoming partner with the success of this project. Another key factor is Fred's knowledge of the Japanese culture. His experience was based out of the U.S. with major assignments leading teams of consultants and associates. Fred based his potential in

Japan on his success in the U.S. which drove him to make an impulsive decision without further consideration.

Perhaps at the other end of the spectrum is the Japanese culture. In Japan, words are not trusted. Putting thoughts into words has a low value in Japan, where harmony and contemplation are highly valued and members of the culture learn “to hear one and understand ten” as they listen to what has not been said (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 203). Japanese value indirect expression. To challenge directly what someone has said is also extremely rude. Since people are not separable from their words, an attack on what someone has said is an attack on that person (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 203). Japanese communication is extremely polite. Attention is carefully paid to doing things in the proper way, according to the rules of etiquette. Communicators should encode messages in such a way that they are in alignment with the local norms because that is the way they can show respect and concern for the other person, and the way they can feel satisfied they are meeting the cultural expectations for communicating in the right way (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 203).

The management strategy Fred used on Tashiro, the Japanese associate, may have been too straightforward which resulted in his overwhelming response. In retrospect, Fred and his colleague, Ralph met with Tashiro to lay out the nature and importance of the task. Fred leaned forward and said, “You can see that this is an important assignment and that we are placing a lot of confidence in you by giving you this assignment”. In contrast, his statement may be more effective when presented to an American associate who may use words as a sense of motivation because s/he can anticipate a reward for good performance.

Essentially, it is important to obtain the knowledge of the Japanese culture and develop some cross-culture communication skills. Although the move to Japan was sporadic and on short notice, it is also very important to have a plan structured for Fred. Providing paid expenses and reasonable living conditions are not the only things to consider before taking this big step. It is equally important to Fred and Kline & Associates for his success on the new assignment. The plan should consist of a training program that includes cross-culture communication skills, Japanese orientation, introduction to members at the new location, and more importantly standards and goals that are needed for this assignment. Updating Fred on the challenges that George faced with his experience and setting possible alternatives that he can use to make it work are also helpful methods of preparation. The implementation process needs to be organized. It should include a timeline with set milestones giving Fred the opportunity to process the information and understand his position and the responsibilities that he is accepting.

Fred may not have sufficient knowledge of the Japanese culture. During the orientation process he should be educated on the differences between the American culture and the Japanese culture. Fred needs to be aware that he comes from a low context culture and will be dealing with people from a high context culture. High context cultures rely on the context of the actual physical environment of communication or an internalized social context. Context is referred to implicitly in communication; the messages can be indirect and allusive. In low context cultures messages are explicit, direct, and completely encoded in words (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p. 101). These differences can lead to unintentional problems in the workplace.

The result of the initial training program should give Fred a good idea of what to expect with the Japanese employees. The next approach should include a networking strategy. A “buddy system” should be in place where a Japanese employee is assigned to work closely with Fred to get him directly oriented with his new work environment. This can even include social networking which can expose Fred to the idiosyncrasies of the Japanese without having to make

mistakes and accidentally offend someone with his American norms. This process may not be cost effective, but if Fred is the best candidate for this assignment, it is important that he succeeds with the support of the human resources department and local mentors and guides. He needs to be fully aware of the new setting and accept the challenges he will be undertaking. With these inputs given by Kline & Associates, the investment into Fred's trainings will be more likely to result in a positive return. Table 1 presents a few specific steps and guidelines for implementation to resolve the current challenge and future dilemmas for new expatriates.

Table 1 - Implementation Plan & Steps for Fred Bailey

Plan & Steps	
Orientation	Get Fred oriented with his new assignment. Advise him of timeline of preparation and date of relocation. Relocation offers: living expenses, children's school tuition, etc.
Training Program	Cross-culture communication training, Education on the difference between the Japanese culture and American culture, & Education on how to deal with High-context culture coming from a low-context culture.
Challenges & Expectations	Inform Fred of the challenges his predecessor faced with current local staff. Set standards of what is expected of him. Break-down of how is daily schedule may look the intensity of the work load, and how he will be rewarded if he succeeds.
Acceptance & Commitment	Fred is aware of the challenges he is going to face and the level of commitment needed to complete the assignment. As a result, Fred will understand what is expected and how this will impact not only his career, but his family's lifestyle. He is then given the opportunity to agree to the commitment.
Buddy System	Continued training program to begin assignment in Japan. Networking opportunity to get familiar with Japanese culture. Socialize with new staff and understand the idiosyncrasies.

Overall, a global project manager must have the capacity to negotiate, communicate, control, assist, plan, and make decisions in a foreign country. For this reason before risking out on any project, Fred as a global project manager should have done a complete cross-cultural training that prepared him to handle the challenges involved with global projects and also prepared his family to those challenges. More importantly, human resources should be aware of the existing challenges based on the previous manager's performance. A new strategy should have been implemented including thorough training and preparation for the assignment to result in a successful journey. At the very least, Fred should have been oriented on the major differences between the cultures, so that he can understand what he is facing.

Summary

In essence, Kline & Associates' Human Resource Department were negligent in many factors for the long-term assignment of Fred Bailey. The company should have been involved in the selection and training process for the expatriate. Generally, a global manager should understand the culture and language of the host country. An ethnocentric approach should not be imposed on the host culture because it can result in defiance and opposition of the local staff, especially among people from a collectivist high context culture such as the Japanese. The local staff will be intentionally unproductive and will be reflective on the executive manager who oversees the operations. The global manager should have good negotiation and communication skills so that he can include members of the local staff and headquarters to participate in a successful project. Finally, a company should not pressure someone to accept an international assignment solely based on economic benefits without considering the family's accommodations.

Discussion Questions

1. What should Fred do in order to complete the assignment successfully?
2. Do you think a pre-departure training program would be equally effective for both Fred and Jenny? Why or why not?
3. If a firm does not want to invest the capital and resources required to train an employee about other cultures to prepare for an international assignment, what other alternatives does the firm have to prepare expatriates for a successful assignment?
4. What do you think is better for Kline & Associates' Tokyo office, a Parent-Country National (PCN) or Host-Country National (HCN) manager?
5. What are some skills a global project manager (PM) must acquire?
6. What must a global project manager (PM) do prior to venturing out on any project?
7. How does culture and diversity impact HR practices?
8. What role does effective communication play in Fred's case? What strategies could Fred use in order to change some of his negative outcomes?
9. When should an interpreter be used in a business meeting? What ways might this external help be beneficial for Fred?

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