Coaching the Global Nomad

Katrina Burrus, PH.D., M.C.C.

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KATRINA BURRUS, PH.D., M.C.C.

PROLOGUE – IN THE BEGINNING

I was five years old, playing on the living room couch, when my mother called out to me from the kitchen that we were going to move again. Having already left the US, Italy, and then Germany, we were now moving to Switzerland. My father started up a soft drink brand in Italy. It had been only nine months since we left Milan, Italy; I had barely started making friends at school in Hamburg, Germany, despite the fact that I spoke only English and Italian, but definitely no German. She was moving my four brothers and me, again, to yet another house. I found some comfort in knowing that my four brothers were part of the move. My father had stayed behind in Milan; my mother had said something about “divorcing,” and then he was no longer around.

A few days later, when the plane to Geneva, Switzerland, wove and hissed against the oncoming wind and I heard the plane’s wheels screech as it hit the runway, I peered behind my seat to see if all of my brothers had not been “divorced” away, and then grabbed onto my teddy bear to tell him not to worry. We had each other, and we would learn the funny new language, eat strange-tasting foods again, and observe the particularities in the way people behave. We had done this before.

Was this five-year-old more influenced by the different national cultures in which she had lived or by her own family culture and context?

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON AN INTERCULTURAL CASE STUDY

Culture encompasses comparative behaviors, beliefs, values (Hofstede, 1980), and perspectives (Sackmann, Phillips, Kleinberg, and Boyacigil, 1997) that shed light on the myriad influences on an individual’s orientations with them. They are called in to new situations because of their skills and past successes, yet working well within local contexts is crucial. Coaching such global nomads is a task of identifying and sorting out the cultural contexts that the executive draws upon in normal and unusual situations; identifying the needs and cultural expectations of the local situation, leadership, and organization; and working toward finding a good fit between the local culture, the executive’s many choices, and the skills and behavior needed in a given situation. Burrus uses a case study and two theoretical frames of intercultural work to examine the issues of coaching the global nomad.

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relentlessly comes back to her direct reports to see what has been accomplished. Socially, she is charming and pleasant, and obtains outstanding results. She has been sent to difficult, emerging markets and has been able to get projects through, resolved, and in a timely manner. Marie, the business developer for Asia of a prestigious, global, consumer-service company with headquarters in the UK, asks for your help (Burrell, 2006). Marie’s boss suggested that she work with a coach, which is unusual; her company seldom invests much in ongoing training for its people. Marie is thus surprised, and feels privileged to benefit from a coaching program. You were highly recommended to her, but live in Europe; Marie, a U.S. citizen of Anglo-Saxon descent, asks you if you can coach her in Beijing, where she has lived for the last year. Joe whispers, “Her Asian teams, from Japan, India, and Beijing, tend to shy away from working directly with her. She has been known to shout at her direct reports publicly and humiliate other colleagues in front of their bosses. Even clients have been subject to her wrath.”

Joe, a British citizen living in Beijing, describes Marie as an outstanding professional with an incredible workload capacity, dealing with multiple, complex situations. “Marie,” he says, “is devoted to the success of the business and obtains outstanding results. She has been sent to difficult, emerging markets in Eastern Europe to troubleshoot problems and has been able to get projects through, resolved, and in a timely manner. Socially, she is charming and pleasant, but at work she is very pushy when promoting her ideas. When she delegates, she relentlessly comes back to her direct reports to see what has been accomplished. Marie, the business developer for Asia of a prestigious, global, consumer-service company with headquarters in the UK, asks for your help (Burrell, 2006). Marie’s boss suggested that she work with a coach, which is unusual; her company seldom invests much in ongoing training for its people. Marie is thus surprised, and feels privileged to benefit from a coaching program. You were highly recommended to her, but live in Europe; Marie, a U.S. citizen of Anglo-Saxon descent, asks you if you can coach her in Beijing, where she has lived for the last year. Joe whispers, “Her Asian teams, from Japan, India, and Beijing, tend to shy away from working directly with her. She has been known to shout at her direct reports publicly and humiliate other colleagues in front of their bosses. Even clients have been subject to her wrath.”

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Joe reports that this, too, is perceived as pushy.

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Marie’s functional boss, Jane, an American based in the US, summarizes Marie’s attitude as, “She lacks confidence. Marie remains silent in meetings,” Jane continues, “She wants to impress people and overcompensates. She tries to impress people that she is bright, and what would we do without her. When she encounters resistance with her direct reports, she becomes aggressive, hierarchical, very top-down. She has little to no empathy or social radar. She is perceived as having little sensitivity to what is required by others.” Jane pauses and says thoughtfully, “She does not know how to profile herself to engage people.”

When Marie gives some information on her background, you find out that she has an older brother who was the apple of their parents’ eyes. All hopes were focused on his career, until he decided to quit the business life to live in a retreat. She was an average student at school, but once her brother left the business world, Marie began to have outstanding results at school. Marie talks proudly about the results she has achieved and her constant travels. She confides in you that she is driven by her own agenda and gets upset when anything gets in her way. She knows that she is perceived as pushy, and she wants to learn how to inspire rather than impose. Her company has given her the opportunity to receive coaching to work on developing her emotional intelligence, which she understands as developing her interpersonal skills. With this background information from Marie and her two bosses, your assessment of the coaching situation begins.

Is the Organization’s Perspective Remedial or Developmental?

Before embarking on any coaching process, it is useful to examine the sponsoring organization’s culture and perspective with regard to the coaching process. Does the organization perceive coaching as remedial or developmental? If coaching is perceived as remedial, the executive might feel threatened, surprised, or even
relieved by referral to a coach. In contrast, if the coaching process is perceived as a privilege for upper-management leadership development, the executive will most likely embrace the process as a developmental opportunity and sign of affirmation from the organization.

In this case, Marie, has produced excellent financial results and perceives the coaching engagement as a privileged investment in her development. Particularly since the coaching engagement is unusual for her company, as is much ongoing training, the coach can help by clarifying the organization’s intent and rationale for enlisting a coach in this case. Ensuring mutually understood objectives is a key role for the coach. In addition, especially when such a coaching process is rare, it is important that the message involved is clearly understood by not only the parties involved, but also all stakeholders in its outcome. Is the organization investing in this executive, and expecting those around her to support that decision? Or is this a remedial action which may carry a stigma for the executive and those for and with whom she works? Such messages, whether positive, negative, or mixed, will complicate the coaching process and the executive’s day-to-day and developmental choices, so clarification and consistent communication of the intended message is crucial.

### How Does the Organization Handle Feedback? Are Expectations Clearly Understood by All?

Another aspect to explore before embarking on coaching is how the corporate culture addresses and practices feedback. Did Marie’s boss already attempt to provide Marie with personalized feedback about her behavior? Did the boss already send Marie to leadership training in an attempt to address her particular issue? What was said during face-to-face appraisal meetings before a coach was called in? What feedback worked, and did not work? Is the culture or leadership skilled at giving developmental and remedial feedback, or is it avoidant of confrontation? Is coaching the last option before Marie is perceived as having hit her highest level of potential, or is it management’s desire to develop and promote Marie to the next professional level? Is the organization apprehensive that Marie will leave the organization if she is not promoted? Even if Marie has outstanding results, is the turnover in her department becoming an issue for the company? What are the company’s and bosses’ expectations of the coaching process, timing, and outcomes? What next steps or consequences are likely if those expectations are not met? Understanding and managing Marie’s bosses’ expectations are crucial responsibilities of the coach.

**Is coaching the last option before Marie is perceived as having hit her highest level of potential, or is it management’s desire to develop and promote Marie to the next professional level?**

### What Are the Corporate Culture and Expected Behaviors?

Coupled with understanding the culture and expectations is the need for clarity around the organization’s culture, values, reward system, and taboos. Every corporation evaluates its success with similar, yet different, success criteria, which may vary somewhat internally as well. These cultural norms inform the executive’s choices, assumptions, and boundaries; correctly interpreting these key cultural issues is every executive’s task. The coach’s role is to support the executive’s bosses’ in explaining those expectations candidly. Often this means clarifying the written and unwritten rules of the corporate culture, and the consequences of not addressing interpersonal relationships in a mutually positive manner.

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One could argue that a Chinese coach would be more knowledgeable of the local culture and more readily available for face-to-face contacts. A local Asian coach may have heightened Marie’s awareness of the local ways. However, a Westerner in Asia may want to be coached by someone with a similar culture when in a totally foreign environment.

What Would Success Look Like for the Different Cultures?

Actively asking Marie’s bosses to define their expected outcomes from the coaching process is essential. In this case there are two bosses from two continents; their underlying cultural assumptions are integral in the desired outcomes and described according to their own cultural perspective. If both bosses in this case are Westerners, it is also essential to ask Asian colleagues how they perceive Marie’s strengths and areas for improvement.

A standard, pre-set interview process might not give a rich enough description of Marie’s behavior from a multiple-culture perspective that unveils and distinguishes the different cultural influences at work (Sackman et al, 1997). What parts of her behavior stem from the corporate culture, the national culture, or her family culture? What parts of her behavior tie to her previous success in Eastern Europe, and what parts may create conflicts between corporate success and local culture? What parts of her behavior are conducive to doing business in Asia and what parts clash with the local ways of doing business?

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How Can the Cross-cultural Coach Identify Cultural Perception Gaps?
One way to measure cultural differences in perception between Marie's Western and Asian colleagues is a coach-led, oral 360-degree feedback interview process with Marie's bosses, colleagues, and direct reports from different cultures. Interview questions must delve deeply into what Marie specifically "does" and "says" (Cranshaw, 2005) that portrays a particular perception of her. Then misinterpretations and biases are less readily assumed. The difference in cultural perceptions might be subtle enough to require abundant detail.

The difference with this process compared to preset or company 360-degree-feedback questionnaires is that the coach, through individual interviews, can probe further into the exact meaning that words, expressions, and behaviors have for each respondent. This is difficult to do with a preset questionnaire where there is little chance to determine the significance and interpretation given to each word by the respondent.

A logical concern is that respondents may qualify their answers to a Westerner versus a local Asian coach-interviewer, which would bias the outcome. To take an analogy, one could question whether Eskimos, who have 36 ways of describing snow, would go to great pains to describe what type of snow they were referring to if talking to a nomad of the Sahara desert. Therefore, a coach that has integrated into their identity several cultures might have a heightened sensitivity to the subtleties of cultural influences. This being said, prompting each respondent to be very specific in what caused the interpretation diminishes that risk of projecting the coach's own cultural references.

How Does the Coach Approach Cross-cultural Coaching Communications and Consequences?
Given the physical distance between the coach and Marie, face-to-face coaching sessions would be difficult to implement on a regular basis. The bosses voiced this concern. Their hesitation to have a coach halfway around the world was overcome when the coach suggested having the first few meetings face-to-face over a few days in Marie's Beijing office. Why might this be easier to address with a few face-to-face contacts? First, although high context is prevalent in Asia, both the executive and her bosses were Anglo-Saxon (typically low-context cultures where meaning is explicit). Secondly, the trust that Marie invested in the coach from trusted references certainly had a strong impact on the bosses' and Marie's decision-making. Here, a low-context style of coaching was secondary to vested trust in the recommended coach.

Particularly in cross-cultural contexts, effective communication relies on the implicit meaning of gestures, posture, voice, and context. Telephone coaching without the face-to-face coaching can be challenging. The lack of non-visual cues makes it more challenging for the coach to know when to encourage, explore further with questions, or simply continue to be silent. A webcam is a possible alternative coming into widespread use. Conversely and surprisingly, several executives have

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said that they find it liberating not to have someone observing them.

What Other Identity-Level Cultural Perspectives May Be at Work?
The multiple-cultures perspective (Sackman et al., 1997) takes into account all facets of identity, a complex and very individualized view of the factors at work. A number of additional identity-level cues are present in the information from Marie and her bosses. The coach needs to explore Marie’s desire to win, which almost overshadows her capacity to perceive the process with which she is reaching her objectives. Does this stem already from her family context? Marie appears to take a competitive versus collaborative stance. Has Marie been rewarded for what she has achieved and not for who she is? The fear of losing motivates her to constantly prove her supremacy, at times at the expense of others. The little girl she once was might not have been simply loved for who she was. This type of profile is not unusual with achievement-oriented executives who measure success almost exclusively in terms of results and not in terms of process. Instead of collaborating, and finding a sense of solidarity that unites her to others, where closeness is shared, Marie may perceive success as a zero-sum game.

Marie also desires closeness with her husband. There is an implied opening to simply be. Burnout has been the natural outcome of many high-performing executives’ insatiable and compulsive desire to perform. Although it is a natural desire to leave one’s mark or legacy, if pursued compulsively or to the exclusion of all else, the executive risks reaching a point at which the work disappoints or no longer provides the satisfaction and meaning it once did. Although this can be a painful period for high-achieving executives, such openings may lead to finding new meaning and better balance between who they are and what they do.

What Are the East-West Dynamics of Relationships versus Task Orientation?
Many expatriates are often assigned based on past track records and achievements: task orientation. However, successful business in Asia depends on the ability to establish relationships, with employees as well as customers (Schneider and Barsoux, 2002). It is not possible to do business without establishing relationships, often referred to in China as Guanxi. Where Anglo-and Northern-European culture executives may avoid doing business with friends and family (as it might interfere with making good business decisions), managers in Asian and Latin cultures would not consider doing business with someone they did not know and trust. Social controls are more important than formal controls.

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One might question whether, in the high-relationship context of China, Marie’s perception as “pushy” and distant from her team might be a function of these East-West dynamics of relationship versus task orientation.

Marie’s achievements in Eastern Europe were exemplary and contributed to her promotion and transfer to an executive role in the Asian market. Eastern Europe is an emerging market, where task orientation could be considered to prevail and be tolerated. One might question whether, in the high-relationship context of China, Marie’s perception as “pushy” and distant from her team might be a function of these East-West dynamics of relationship versus task orientation.

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What Are the East-West Dynamics of High versus Low Context?

Conceiving people in public is rarely a good idea. In addition, some cultures and individuals are more accepting of feedback than others. It may be culturally more important to save a relationship, to preserve harmony, than accomplish the task. Many messages need to be stated indirectly, and it is important to be able to read body language and understand what is not being said (Schneider and Barsoux, 2002). Marie needs to realize that her body language (e.g., shouting, being aggressive, rolling her eyes, walking briskly, turning away from conversations) are read very carefully, more so than she may intend. In Asia, feedback needs to be conducted in a way that will save face and may even require going through a third party.

Joe's expectation of the coaching is that Marie creates more harmony within her team and promotes her team. Leadership in Asia is closely tied to promoting the team, not oneself. Essential to the coaching is creating awareness of Marie's choices: a short-term strategy where she wins or looks good individually, or a longer-term strategy in which she empowers her team. It is not a question of one action compared to another, so much as increasing Marie's sense of observation, distinction and developing a repertoire of behaviors that serves her and others better. Often the process is to (a) create awareness and insight into her almost compulsive need to shine; (b) find alternative behaviors better aligned to her short- and long-term goals; and (c) shift from filling a compulsive need of the self toward integrating others' needs in how she perceives success.

What Are the Roles of Power Distance, Hierarchy, and Status?

Mary's top-down behavior toward her subordinates but submissive attitude toward her boss can be seen as a reflection of high power distance (Hofstede, 1980), as is her perceived need to have the last word. While in Asia, the boss is supposed to act like the boss (in contrast to Anglo and Northern European cultures). The boss is nevertheless expected to show relationship-oriented care and concern for employees and customers (Schneider and Barsoux, 2002). Although Marie does delegate, this is undermined by her constant checking up. Furthermore, delegation may not always be appreciated, as the boss is expected to make the decisions. She may be confusing her employees by supposedly giving them responsibility and then "taking it away". Furthermore, criticizing people in public is punishing, reinforcing the top-down position, and encouraging employees to avoid taking responsibility for fear of making mistakes, and subsequent public humiliation.

How Best Can the 360-Degree-Feedback Interviews Be Leveraged?

Another advantage of in-depth, face-to-face interviews for the 360-degree-feedback process is to prepare Marie's colleagues and direct reports to understand and expect Marie's behavior to change during coaching. (Once the interviews feedback process is underway, it is more costly to change what Marie says or does (Cranshaw, 2005) to portray the perception she evokes, an action plan to alter those perceptions is more readily established and enacted. The differences in cultural perceptions of specific behaviors can be teased out from the interviews. How do Chinese businesseeppeople perceive a Westerner walking away from the conversation in mid-stream? Would most of Marie's U.S. colleagues interpret that behavior with the same intensity? This may require patterns, identified through a number of colleagues, before any cultural inferences are possible.

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The individual interview process also offers an opportunity for the coach to encourage people within Marie’s environment to provide her with feedback. If there is little trust between Marie and her direct reports, any change of behavior, even positive, may be perceived as manipulative rather than a sincere attempt to improve relationships. If an individual is coached, but the system within her working environment is not ready to perceive or accept her behavioral changes, then the changes from the coaching process have less of a chance to be sustainable.

Within complex, multidimensional situations, a systemic perspective allows the coach and Marie to more readily identify the patterns, connections, and alliances within the organizations, and how the executive can influence them.

Moreover, if on-going training is unusual in the organization, it is important to explore what other forms of feedback loops the organization provides. For the coaching to succeed in the eyes of Marie and her bosses, it is essential that the stakeholders perceive and recognize Marie’s changes. For those changes to be sustainable, the system needs to provide Marie with ample feedback and encouragement. The system must, in turn, be encouraged to do so. Thus a systemic approach to the 360-degree feedback process benefits all stakeholders, and markedly improves the chances for success.

The coach’s role is to increase Marie’s awareness of how her leadership is perceived in different contexts (East and West), in different situations (collaborative versus competitive), and by multiple stakeholders (bosses, direct reports, and colleagues). Multiple cultural perspectives need to be examined as they interplay with Marie’s awareness of her values, motivations, and short- and long-term goals. This process will increase Marie’s cultural awareness and choices. Given that new behaviors, stemming from a shift in mindset or a transformational experience, are difficult to enact in a system that may not change, the coach’s role is to facilitate how Marie might best leverage the needed change in her work environment and system.

EPILOGUE: WHEN THE FIVE YEAR-OLD GREW UP

With one quick, efficient movement, she threw her 40-year-old bear in the suitcase and snapped it shut. At 40, it seemed silly that she would still carry her worn-out bear around the world, but she did not want to deal with the sorrow and upsurge in unresolved grief of leaving it behind. Her past integrated so many
goodbyes, to schools, friends, and homes, that any more goodbyes provoked a dam of emotions. But in a few minutes, she knew she would also feel the surge of excitement of taking another plane to travel to yet another culture, and yet another multicultural executive team. She had become adept in integrating multicultural teams, working in multiple languages, and facilitating their tacit and explicit communications. Why? Because developing an uncanny sense of observation was a survival skill needed to constantly integrate into new places. Did she rely on simply being accepted in the next country to which she travelled? No, integrating quickly into a new environment meant seizing opportunities to become closer with a selected team or appearing worthy to that team or group. As she settled into the flight, she reflected on Marie’s case, and thought about the family context in which the older brother was the apple of their parent’s eye, making being accepted a challenging matter. Which of Marie’s multiple cultural perspectives was overshadowing others: the global nomad experience, or the family, to mention only two? The coaching process is part of the exploration of uncharted territory – the nomad’s touchstone.

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REFERENCES


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