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COACHING MANAGERS IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

Myths and realities of the itinerant executive

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Peter, based in Hong Kong, is an executive working for a multinational headquartered in Switzerland. His company's executive team keeps him on the radar as he is being groomed to be a future C-suite executive. He is leading the company's teams in India, Singapore, and China to develop the new Asian markets. He has lived in Hong Kong for the last two years. His wife and children like the place, as life there is easier than in Bogota, his previous post. He spent the first years of his life in Italy. His parents have now returned to the US, after retiring from a transient diplomatic career. For the next New Year holidays, he and his family will visit his sister in Bangalore, a trip he likes, as it reminds him of the years he spent there. Where to spend occidental New Year came after a long debate; his sister had wanted him to share the holidays with her in Germany, where she is pursuing an advertising career. His brother insisted on meeting in Beijing, where he now resides. Peter mulled over where home might be. Should it be governed by his Swiss passport, even though he has never lived in Switzerland? Should it be determined by where his parents live? Or should he call Hong Kong home, having resided there for the last two years? Peter was hard pressed to decide upon the culture with which he identified. Finally, he decided that it did not matter where he met his family for the New Year, as he belonged everywhere and nowhere. Working for the same company, albeit around the world, was the constant in his life.

Do you recognize the coaching client in this description? Then surely you have coached an executive nomad: a multinational manager who has not one innate cultural reference, but several. Growing up, the executive nomad lived in numerous countries and today travels and lives all over the world for his or her company.

Executive nomads have unique personal characteristics with professional implications that benefit multinational organizations. These unique characteristics, developed to adapt and thrive while moving to different countries, are the same attributes that prove beneficial to high potentials in multinationals; a high potential being, among other things, a strong performer in changing environments. Although the global nomad's attributes are precious for organizations, their unique upbringing has both personal and professional consequences at different times during their careers. An understanding of this particular profile's strengths and challenges will enhance the executive coach's contribution both for the executive nomad and the organization.

WHY THE NEED FOR GLOBAL NOMADS?

Inherently, the executive nomad has what many multinational companies seek: innate intercultural instincts, mobility, and adaptability. Increasing globalization of markets and companies has compounded this need, making these profiles even more highly regarded and sought after by companies:

The past CEO of General Electric has asserted to his managers on many occasions that his example of leadership cannot last in a global company and that a new breed of leader is needed. [Quoting Jack Welch] 'The Jack Welch of the future cannot be like me. I spent my entire career in the United States. The next head of General Electric will be somebody who spent time in Bombay, in Hong Kong, in Buenos Aires. We have to send our best and brightest overseas and make sure they have the training that will allow them to be the global leaders who will make GE flourish in the future'.

(Black, Morrison and Gregersen 1999: 20)

Jack Welch realized that future leaders will work in a globalized environment, and underscored the need for leaders with experience on different continents. Yet, his ethnocentric mindset is still evident when he suggests that the company's 'best' need to go overseas and be trained – instead of recruiting and immersing lifelong multicultural leaders from around the globe who are capable of holding a perspective outside the restrictive cultural lens through which the monocultural 'best and brightest' peer.

The chairman and CEO of Nestlé, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, also emphasizes the need for cultural understanding combined with firsthand international experience:

You cannot limit yourself to knowing just one culture, for you need to have an understanding of and respect for different national cultures. . . . When you are selling food, . . . you are participating in the consumers' cultural relationship with food, and this requires a much stronger understanding of the country's culture. The consumers' relationship to food is highly emotional and culturally specific. Therefore, you need a manager who understands and respects different cultures . . . Frankly speaking, I cannot imagine a top manager at Nestlé who has not lived in several countries and who does not speak at least two or three languages. This is a basic requirement.

(Burrus-Barbey 2000: 498)

While the mandate from multinationals is clear, a survey of *Fortune* 500 firms completed in 1997 indicated that 85 per cent of firms responding did not have an adequate number of global leaders (Black et al. 1999: 7). And the demand for global leaders continues to accelerate with the pace of globalization.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GLOBAL NOMAD AND THE EXPATRIATE?

How does the executive nomad differ from the immigrant or expatriate? The immigrant leaves his or her country of origin for political or economic reasons and does not intend to return to live there again; the immigrant moves once and identifies with one or the other culture. The expatriate may have a similar lifestyle to the executive nomad as an adult but still identifies with his or her home country and intends to return. The executive nomad was exposed to multiple

cultures while growing up and has a multicultural reference which can be referred to as ‘third culture’ or ‘global nomad’. The global nomad identifies with several cultures and, if his or her partner does not decide otherwise, tends to maintain or recreate a *mélange* of homes in the different places they travel to at different times, and in the spaces in-between (Pollock and Van Reken: 1999).

A useful analogy rests in the global nomad’s way of learning languages. A global nomad learns several languages when young, integrating the different cultural references of several languages concurrently, and discovers an understanding that could be expressed as in-between: beyond any particular culture or single language. If the typical executive learns a new language as an adult, he or she learns through the mother tongue’s cultural perspective and language construction to understand the new language. The typical executive or expatriate thus takes an ethnocentric viewpoint to understand the new and different, even if he or she is open to a new perspective. Moreover, the expatriate traveling the world tends to retain an emotional cultural attachment to his or her home country, as demonstrated by this quote from a Swiss ambassador:

There is not one day that I do not think of coming back home. The place I belong to is here. Everything I learn I want to contribute to developing my home town. The advantage of my travels is [that] I am more flexible. I have more perspective and a better understanding of the qualities and defects of my culture even though, at times, I feel like a stranger in my home town.

(Personal correspondence)

A coach needs to assess whether a new client identifies with a specific culture, or whether he or she is in the in-between. In the above case, even if this Swiss ambassador feels estranged from it, he still identifies with his home culture, as is the characteristic of the expat. This contrasts with the executive nomad, who is at home everywhere, and nowhere. The personal paradox, discussed below, notwithstanding, this kind of mobility is highly valued by multinationals.

After defining how to differentiate the itinerant leader’s orientation, from expat to immigrant to global nomad, further questions remain: what are the unique attributes of executive nomads that position them so well for these globalized, multinational leadership positions? What issues might a coach face with a global nomad? Sorting out the facts and dispelling the myths require a closer look at the executive nomad’s background and skills, illustrated here through the stories and experiences of such individuals, gleaned from my years of interviewing and coaching these unique executives on their nomadic lifestyles, as well as being one.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXECUTIVE NOMADS

Executive nomads represent a new and different type of corporate leader who is more adaptable, interculturally successful, and willing to work in a constantly changing environment. Executive nomads tend to have a certain humility when immersed in a new culture. Typical characteristics are flexibility, tolerance, and openness to integrating new experience. They are usually keen observers, acutely aware of cultural contexts and nuances. This combination of instinctive skills makes them particularly adept at navigating rapid change while balancing complexity and nuance. Each of these characteristics, instinctive to the executive nomad, is highly desirable for the multinational seeking success-prone managers for intercultural assignments.

HUMBLED BY AND EAGER TO IMMERSE IN NEW CULTURES

Many executive nomads grew up being physically different from those around them, an experience integrated into their self-perceptions. Some may have memories of being bullied by other children if they did not blend in. Blending in socially with the locals becomes the quickest way to camouflage differences or build a new network of friends in the host country. Contrary to the ethnocentric individual who looks at the world from his or her own perspective, a monocultural outlook of the world without diversity or dissension, the global nomad generally searches for the differences to assimilate and adapt. This humility in the face of difference provides stark contrast to the xenophobic behavior of those less experienced in diverse environments.

Executive nomads usually integrate into the local culture by speaking the language and socializing with local friends. In contrast, many expatriates recreate the cultural ghetto and live and socialize almost exclusively with other expatriates to recreate a community similar to that of their home country. Some can stay 20 years in a country without ever speaking the local language. Thus the expat tends to remain a visitor, while the executive nomad moves toward integration into the local experience. Multinationals benefit from having an executive who can adapt seamlessly to the local culture like a chameleon and leverage local attributes while understanding the multinational's agenda.

CURIOUS ABOUT AND AWARE OF CULTURAL NUANCES AND CONTEXTS

Executive nomads are curious, and this curiosity not only helps them adapt to the local environment but is also valuable for understanding the nuances of clients' and customers' subtle, specific, and tacit needs. Growing up as children constantly on the move, executive nomads have had to develop a keen sense of observation and a heightened awareness of context, enabling them to adapt and thrive in their ever-changing environments (Pollock and Van Reken 1999).

Early on, the executive nomad learns that there are many ways of perceiving and interpreting the same event. This intimate understanding of local perspectives may, in turn, provoke the executive nomad to ambivalence about following local requests or those of headquarters, particularly if the latter are not culture-informed. Viewed another way, many diplomats stay a limited period in the host country, for fear that, if they identify with and invest too much in the local country, they will no longer represent their home countries as fervently.

The global nomad does not identify with either the local or the headquarter culture completely, and can serve as a translator who negotiates, interprets, and explains the perspectives of the locals to headquarters, and vice versa, so that learnings can be leveraged from both perspectives. The locals will feel understood by the global nomad, and the organization will have a good representative of the company's objectives. Although this intercultural perspective may come with feelings of solitude and not belonging anywhere, the coach can be instrumental in highlighting the positive contributions of the leader's unique perspective.

ADEPT AT RAPID CHANGE IN COMPLEX SITUATIONS

'Nomads tend to think quickly on our feet and can take the initiative to troubleshoot – but we often do so in a context of understanding the currents and observing the situation first' (Carlson 1997: 2). Growing up in the multiplicity of countries and cultures, executive nomads observe (a) different and sometimes conflicting philosophical and political perspectives firsthand (e.g., Osama Bin Laden is a hero for some and a terrorist for others), and (b) cultures that are on two parallel paths (e.g., Western culture is time- and task-oriented, while, in Eastern cultures, interpersonal relationships are of great importance) (Burrus 2006; Rosinski 2003; Schneider and Barsoux 2002). The executive nomad's ability to negotiate and collaborate across cultural differences is a rare and highly valued talent.

Although cross-cultural experience affects adults as well as children, cultural experience during childhood develops as one's sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formed. Growing up in a highly mobile world, where everything in their lives is constantly changing, may be so integrated into who nomads are that they thrive on this lifestyle as adults, or recreate the nomadism, especially if the work environment offers exciting new challenges.

I have found that some nomads, who have consistently moved every two to four years with their parents, become adults who have integrated this cycle of change into their lives and tend to reproduce a similar cycle in their professional careers. In other words, around the second to fourth years, the executive experiences a certain restlessness and might start looking for change. If a professional opportunity emerges in the marketplace at that specific time of restlessness, the global nomad might seize it without much thought.

The coach's role, in this case, is to help the executive explore this restlessness and whether there is any pattern in the timing of these changes. For other nomadic leaders, the itinerant lifestyle becomes a need, and a sedentary lifestyle causes a certain amount of anxiety, as the quote below reveals:

I have to keep moving. It is scary to stay in the same place for a long time. I think it would have a dramatic effect on me. I would feel something is missing, like an engine that is no longer working. My career would be at a halt. It would be a nightmare for me to live in a little village with a small-town mentality where everyone knows each other.

(Member of the executive team of a multinational consumer goods company)

The moving into new, challenging situations becomes a motor upon which global nomads thrive. Some companies leverage their mobility, especially if they are high potentials or functional specialists who are sent around the world to resolve issues requiring their expertise. One of the coach's contributions is to help the global nomad identify something constant in constant change, and help reevaluate what has meaning for the global nomad when the thrill of novelty and new challenges that drives the global nomad forward wears off. This brings us to some of the particular challenges of the global nomad.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE EXECUTIVE NOMADS' ISSUES AND GAPS?

For all of their intercultural skills and instincts, executive nomads often have a few gaps in their experience. Their mobile lives and lifestyles often result in a lack of rootedness, or a sense of a place from which they came. Similarly, they do not enjoy the traditional sense of community, in

terms of place and support. And because they are so adept at multiple perspectives, executive nomads often clash with the traditional status quo, questioning its underlying assumptions

If China can build the infrastructure for a magnetic train in Shanghai to cover 40 km from the airport to downtown in eight minutes, why not question the Swiss incessant need to debate, for the last 25 years, whether they should or should not build a 2 km tunnel under the lake? The itinerant leaders have multiple perspectives, which aids them to question underlying assumptions. Organizations may leverage these attributes to promote change.

ROOTLESSNESS: NO SENSE OF HOME

At one point upon their professional paths, or after an emotional event, the global nomad feels a sense of rootlessness, of not belonging, or of solitude. As in the prototype described above, family members may be dispersed around the globe, the job may come to a transition point, or there may be a career lull, when the nomad's sense of rootlessness drives a search to find a place to drop the suitcases and feel grounded. The following examples illustrate how global nomads deal with this rootlessness:

For the younger executive nomad, buying a house simply allows the executive to continue the mobile lifestyle, while providing a better sense of roots and balance for the global nomad and his family. The real focus of the young nomad is often the curiosity and enthusiasm that go with a new job and a new place.

In another example:

The Swiss Hungarian executive of a consumer goods company decided to buy a chalet in the Swiss Alps. He spends only two weeks a year in his chalet, but he calls it home. It provides him and his family with some sense of belonging, a place to which they could always fly back while relocating in different countries.

Buying the home was his attempt to feel more grounded and keep something that epitomizes part of his cultural identity.

In this next example, the itinerant leader is an ex-McKinsey consultant, newly married for the second time; his wife, an expatriate, wanted to build a home:

I get anchored in myself, my wife gets anchored in her surroundings. . . . She wants a home. I look forward to building and designing a house and calling it mine. I want to own land and watch the house grow old. To know I have a place that I will call home is appealing. I can come back to the same place. It will be a whole new experience and another level of anchoring.

The global nomad looks at the house from an outsider, reflective stance, 'I want to watch the house grow old.' The house is an object that he is observing. He does not see himself in it yet. It is a place he can 'call' home. He did not say it will *be* a home. The coach's discussion with the global nomad is identifying what 'home' and 'anchoring' represent for the global nomad, how these concepts might be different for his partner, and how each one's needs can be met with understanding.

This sense of rootlessness can be heightened after the death of parents, when the sense of loss is compounded with the sense of not belonging anywhere. In this fourth example, parents represent the anchor:

A diplomat said that, as soon as both parents passed away, he felt compelled to buy a flat where his parents had lived most of their lives; preferably, he wanted their flat.

The coach begins by exploring what the flat represents to the executive, what he needs to be constant, what can be mobile, and which culture has more meaning to him than others? This sense of uneasiness can also be instigated by a career hitting its glass ceiling, or an executive near retirement who needs to decide where he or she is going to retire.

Many companies send their global executives abroad as change agents to restructure affiliates or transfer critical functional knowledge. Although executive nomads thrive on being mobile, at some point, they tire of being challenged or changing everything year after year, especially if it creates havoc in their personal lives. When the mobile life loses some of its luster, or personal and family relations show serious strains from moving constantly, the global executive often enters a critical moment of reevaluating the nomadic lifestyle. Often there is an active and conscious search for a sense of being grounded. This desire for a home may be compounded by a desire to form a family, provide adequate childcare, or take care of aging parents. Whether accurate or not, such pressures may be perceived by companies as more intense on women executive nomads. A coach can highlight the developmental changes the executive is going through combined with the work/family reconciliation.

NO COMMUNITY OR SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Family challenges, particularly, highlight the nomadic issues of not belonging, being an outsider, and having no extended family or local community on which to rely for support. Yet executive nomads often work through the discomfort of being new. To counter the initial feelings of not belonging, nomads draw upon their curiosity and enthusiasm for new locales and cultures to bridge the gap. How does this differ from the expatriate? The expatriate carries this sense of community in and from the home country. The executive nomad's allegiance, by contrast, is to the here and now, to multiple peoples and institutions, without living long enough in any one area to develop a lasting allegiance to any particular community.

As respects the executive nomad's family, the multinational should provide or outsource logistical support to help in finding new schools, housing, and the various administrative matters that come with a family move to a new home and country. These key infrastructure issues aid and speed the transition, and provide local contacts and context beyond the company itself. Otherwise, all of this stress is added to the executive's and family's workload and pressures while trying to adapt to a new environment, home, job, lifestyle, and country. Even if the executive nomad thrives on the novelty of the situation and the new work challenges, the trailing spouse may not. Clearly, whatever support coaches and companies can provide to improve executive nomads' and their families' resiliency to serial adaptations is pivotal to their success and start-up time in such roles.

CLASH WITH THE STATUS QUO

As executive nomads grew up with many geographical changes, they seldom rely on normal moorings and support systems. This sense of confusion may make the executive nomad more self-assured than average, with a worldview more knowledgeable and circumspect than most. Moreover, having less of a sense of community, the executive nomad is more readily willing to

challenge the status quo. As inveterate change agents, executive nomads can transpose their acute perceptions and adaptability to the work environment, insightfully seeing what needs to get done, and clearly articulating how to get there. ‘Those that have never lived and worked outside of their home country don’t question the pertinence of their decisions in the local culture. They make many assumptions and do not question them’ (Member of the executive committee of a multinational consumer good company).

Each of these aspects of the executive nomad has its strengths and inherent drawbacks. Yet the companies assigning executives to these posts want change, and know that executive nomads are most likely to be able to deliver it, despite or because of their rootlessness, illusive community support, and questioning of the status quo. As executive nomads are increasingly in demand for their rare skills, coaches will need to understand their unique characteristics and their implications on their personal and professional lives.

HOW THE GLOBAL NOMAD’S COACH CAN HELP

How can a coach leverage the executive nomad’s competencies? When coaching expatriates or executive nomads – such as the prototypical executive at the top of this chapter – the coach’s task is to:

- Help to identify and sort out the cultural contexts upon which the executive draws in normal and unusual situations;
- Identify the cultural and leadership needs and expectations of the local situation, and work toward finding a good fit between the local culture, the executive’s many choices, and the skills and behaviors needed in a given situation (Burrus 2006); and
- Raise spouse/partner and family issues, work/family reconciliation, and organizational support for these key infrastructure issues for all executives abroad.

The executive nomads’ key talents – flexibility, tolerance, observation, curiosity, appreciation of detail and context – make them particularly adaptable to integrating new experience and adept at navigating rapid change while balancing complexity and nuance. Their unique upbringings, though, also render them vulnerable in the areas of rootlessness, community support, and challenges to the status quo.

The executive nomad lifestyle, while envied and in demand, remains little understood, and thus fraught with misconceptions and paradox. Multinationals and their coaches will be well served to work through coaching on an individual basis. Many of the specific issues facing executive nomads, men and women alike, and their companies, will continue to evolve rapidly. Coaching can be instrumental in accelerating the process and ensuring a good fit of executive nomads and multinational leadership needs.

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