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# COACHING WOMEN MANAGERS IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

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## WOMEN IN MULTINATIONALS: MISUNDERSTOOD AND UNDERUTILIZED

The way to the top in multinationals is clearly built abroad; overseas assignments provide rich learning and a definitive proving ground in both operational and intercultural experience (Bennis 1989; Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001; Schein 2003; Weber 1996). Yet, women comprise only 14 per cent of the expatriate population (Koretz 1999). Why? Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, chief executive officer of Nestlé SA, one of the 50 largest companies in the world (see Forbes 2006), told me:

> This is the reason why it is more difficult to find women in top-management positions. Women are as competent as men. However, if you want to have a career at Nestlé, you must be open to relocate frequently. You cannot judge from here what is really happening there. It is necessary to be exposed to and have lived in those countries. This means that during your career you have to live in one or several of those areas. Up to now, it has been easier to find men willing to move frequently. Whether this will continue to be the case in the future, who knows? This is perhaps the one aspect which makes an international career more difficult for women.
>
> (Quoted in Burrus-Barbey 2000: 498)

Every woman in business has experience with the glass ceiling, the illusive barrier to C-suite success (Acker 2006; Bible and Hill 2007; Eagly and Carli 2007; Noble and Moore 2006; Valian 1998). But how does the gender barrier play out in international business? What is the experience of women in multinationals, particularly those in or vying for the coveted expatriate spots? How do leadership perspectives and styles, family roles and responsiblities, and cultural and gender prejudices impact the woman working abroad, and her opportunities to even get or succeed in such a job? This chapter identifies the myths, pardoxes, and facts about international businesswomen; the issues of women in international posts; and strategies for coaching these women on navigating the complex multicultural environment of global organizational life.

Understanding and appreciating the experience of international women executives is critical to the global organizations who deploy them, their human resources (HR) teams and the

women and their families and, of course, their coaches. The evidence of bottom-line business advantage for businesses that embrace diversity is overwhelming (Catalyst n.d.; Ghoshal and Bartlett 1997; Kanter 1995; Kouzes and Posner 1995; Pfeffer 1998). Thus, coaching these women is crucial to facilitating and ensuring their success, and promoting greater diversity, intercultural competency, and business competitiveness.

## CEILINGS, WALLS, AND MAZES: BARRIERS BY ANY OTHER NAME

Various metaphors have been used to describe the poor representation of women executives in business. The glass ceiling connotes the invisible barrier on the way to the top of the organization, beyond which one can see, but not go (Hymowitz and Schellhardt 1986). A new, more accurate, and more powerful metaphor has recently emerged: a labyrinth − 'walls all around' (Eagly and Carli 2007: 63–4) − to contradict and supplant the simplistic, breakable notion of the glass ceiling with a much more complex maze of obstacles on the path to C-suite success.

> Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change. Believing in the existence of a glass ceiling, people emphasize certain kinds of interventions: top-to-top networking, mentoring to increase board memberships, requirements for diverse candidates in high-profile succession horse races, litigation aimed at punishing discrimination in the C-suite. None of these is counterproductive; all have a role to play. The danger arises when they draw attention and resources away from other kinds of interventions that might attack the problem more potently. If we want to make better progress, it's time to rename the challenge.
>
> (Eagly and Carli 2007: 64)

So what are the facts that confirm women's poor representation in international business and expatriate roles? Women make up half of the population, and over 40 per cent of the ranks of managerial positions in US business, for instance (Eagly and Carli 2007). So far, so good. But that's where the equity breaks down. Women do not have equal access to entry − or mid-level positions, much less strategic roles leading to the top (Eagly and Carli 2007; Valian 1998). Women hold only 15 per cent of corporate officer positions in US-based companies, and a mere 7 per cent of the top earner positions. Within their 15 per cent of the officer positions, 73 per cent of those women are in staff roles, and only 27 per cent are in line roles, the gateway positions to top leadership (Catalyst n.d.). In other industrialized nations, women's status is similar. In the 50 largest publicly traded companies in each of the EU countries, women hold an average of 11 per cent of the top executive positions (Eagly and Carli 2007). And the trend is static to declining (Catalyst n.d.).

The cause of this dismal situation is embedded in patriarchal culture, a status quo maintained by various myths and paradoxes (Bourdieu and Paseron 1977; Eagly and Carli 2007; Valian 1998). Changing the cultural status quo is extremely difficult, as resistance to change is systemic (Kotter 1995; Schein 1992). Yet the myths that help sustain the status quo signal how and where change might get a foothold.

## THE MYTHS: SHE WOULDN'T GO, AND IT WOULDN'T WORK ANYWAY

Even the most progressive organizations promulgate myths which support and maintain the existing culture and undermine efforts toward change (Kotter 1995; Schein 1992). Fallacious

and discrimatory assumptions about women's fitness for and performance in expatriate roles engender unfounded bias in expatriate selection, HR policy and practice, leadership and management decision-making, expat supervision and interaction, and in-country expat support (Mayrhofer and Scullion 2002; Tzeng 2006; Vance, Paik and White 2006).

Various reasons cited by business leadership for not giving overseas assignments to women who work for multinational corporations include:

- Lack of motivation to pursue such positions;
- Lack of qualifications;
- Inability to manage work and family responsibilities in an expat environment;
- Physical safety concerns for women in underdeveloped countries;
- Concern for women's ability to cope with isolation and loneliness in a foreign country;
- Spousal career concerns; and
- Severe gender prejudices, especially in developing countries (Adler 1994; Antal and Izraeli 1993; Izraeli, Banai and Zeira 1980; Tzeng 2006; Tye and Chen 2005; Vance et al. 2006; Wah 1998).

Thus, even as the ranks of women in the executive pipeline have increased toward formidable parity, these fallacious assumptions about women's readiness and capabilities to serve in expat posts persist.

Private sector organizations' expat selection, 'is carried out largely on the basis of technical competence, with minimal attention being paid to the interpersonal skills and domestic situations of potential expatriates' (Anderson 2005: 567) and HR often has a limited role. When HR *is* involved, selection decision-making consistently places 'greater emphasis on stress tolerance and less emphasis on such characteristics as gender and home country (domestic) job performance' (Tye and Chen 2005: 15). In contrast, NGO selection practices differ markedly in that psychological testing is widely used and the family is treated as a unit and included in the selection process (Anderson 2005: 567).

Thus the facts begin to emerge. But these disparities, false assumptions, and unfair practices are compounded by ironic paradoxes relative to the woman expatriate and her male competitors.

## THE PARADOXES: DAMNED IF SHE DOES, DAMNED IF SHE DOESN'T

The gender barrier often manifests in a double bind in which women in business find themselves (Jamieson 1995). Simply put, what works for men doesn't work for women, or actually works against women when they emulate the same behavior and performance as men (Eagly and Carli 2007; Shames 1997; Wah 1998). These contradictory expectations of women were identified early in the glass ceiling research:

- Take risks but be consistently outstanding;
- Be tough without sacrificing feminity or being 'macho';
- Be ambitious without expecting equal treatment to men; and
- Take responsibility but strategically follow the advice of others (Morrison, White, Van Velsor and Center for Creative Leadership 1987: 57).

Some of these dichotomies are systemic in business itself. Organizations talk teamwork, yet laud, value, and promote individual achievement (Lipman-Blumen 1996). The double bind

plays out for women in multinational business particularly in terms of leadership style and marriage and family issues.

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP STYLE

Male leadership connotes assertiveness, control, ambition, and self-confidence. Yet a woman with these more aggressive characteristics may be perceived as less effective and not engaging the more democratic (Goleman 2001) and communal style expected of women (Eagly and Carli 2007; Shames 1997; Wah 1998). In certain cultural environments this paradox can be even more detrimental to women in international business, as exemplified by the following quote of an Asian employee talking about her expat boss (personal correspondence):

> Her style is confrontational and aggressive and it does not work in an Asian market. If we feel that aggression, we will simply not carry out her orders. Some people do not want to work with her and only agree to deal with her through emails. This situation makes her even more aggressive.

Usually women use more participative and collaborative styles than men (Eagly and Carli 2007; Helgesen 1990, 1995; Lipman-Blumen 1996). When a man emulates these qualities, he is lauded and rewarded (Eagly and Carli 2007). But when a woman emulates the male leadership style, it is perceived as detrimental and may backfire.

## MARRIAGE AND FAMILY ISSUES FOR WOMEN IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

Another common barrier, particularly for expatriates, is marriage, family, and relocation to other countries. The paradox here is simple: 'Marriage and parenthood are associated with higher wages for men but not for women' (Eagly and Carli 2007: 65). Yet the fact that women are the childbearers and continue to take on more of the family responsibilities than men makes solutions less obvious, both emotionally and pragmatically. Clearly, a woman may decide to terminate or delay a mobile career because of marital and maternal responsibilities (Tzeng 2006).

But, beyond childbearing itself, the facts of family life abroad for the executive, trailing spouse and children are complex and poorly understood (Tzeng 2006), and may surprise decisionmakers who 'often assume that mothers have domestic responsibilities that make it inappropriate to promote them to demanding positions' (Eagly and Carli 2007: 68). This perception may apply even when a woman executive has forgone a family life for a career.

These are not just women's issues (Pomeroy 2007). Companies would benefit by providing generous support to expat employees and their families to contribute to their in–country well-being, performance, and successful repatriation and retention (Andreason 2003; Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski 2001; Lazarova and Caligiuri 2001; Richey 1996; Rosinski 2003; Shaffer and Harrison 1998; Stahl, Chei Hwee Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin and Taniguchi 2007; van der Zee, Ali and Salomé 2005).

Thus, though men and women both face family obligations and inherent challenges in balancing work and family life abroad, the challenge is perceived as culturally different for men and women. As such, the coach's support can be tailored to the executive woman's adjustment

needs in developing culturally specific behavioral strategies to adapt to her new environment. Coaches can also gather 360° feedback data, which, when debriefed with cultural sensitivity, may explain the paradoxes and the fine line between being damned or praised in cross-cultural environments.

## THE FACTS: IT'S NOT A GENDER ISSUE – ALL EXPATS NEED SUPPORT

The stereotypes, false assumptions, and biases don't stand up when multinationals research the facts about men and women in international assignments. Research demonstrates that gender is unrelated to:

- Interest in and qualification for expatriate assignments (Adler 1994; Selmer and Leung 2003; Tharenou 2003; Tzeng 2006);
- Expatriate performance (Caligiuri and Tung 1999; Sinangil and Ones 2003; Tye and Chen 2005);
- Expatriate turnover intentions (Caligiuri and Tung 1999; Tye and Chen 2005);
- Expatriate adjustment abroad (Selmer and Leung 2003; Tucker, Bonial and Lahti 2004; Tye and Chen 2005), although women may experience higher interaction and work adjustment (Selmer and Leung 2003) particularly in countries with masculine values (Caligiuri and Tung 1999), while men may experience greater psychological adjustment (Selmer and Leung 2003); and
- Work/life balance (Brett and Stroh 1994; Pomeroy 2007); female expats actually find work/life balance easier than in home-country roles because domestic help is often provided (Adler 1994).

Thus objective criteria of expatriate success are gender neutral. In a gender-neutral environment, in fact, it's conceivable that women's success rate might be even be higher than men's due to their leadership styles and intercultural sensitivity. Yet substantive gender biases remain in other cultures around the world, and thus may continue to promulgate bias and impact local perceptions of women expats abroad (Keillor, Thomas and Hauser 2006). Coaches, therefore, are well served to understand and address the issues that their women clients in international roles face, and work to facilitate their selection for, and adjustment and success in, these strategic roles. The next section illustrates some of women expats' experiences in the field.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN MULTINATIONALS

Women expats experience day-to-day gender- and culture-driven challenges, particularly in less developed countries (Adler 1994; Antal and Izraeli 1993; Izraeli et al. 1980) and/or countries with masculine-based values (Caligiuri and Tung 1999; Shames 1997; Wah 1998). Women expats' success, particularly relative to gender, can be viewed in four categories: women's individual characteristics, their organizations, their families, and the local host nationals with whom they work (Caliguiri and Cascio, 1998). The issues of women expats in each are illustrated with actual vignettes from published research and my own practice.

## Challenges expatriate women managers may face

Gertrude was a business turnaround wizard, and had succeeded brillantly in emerging markets. Her straightforward, all-business style had served her well. But in Asia, this same leadership style created resistance, avoidance and, finally, isolation from her employees.

Angela had argued with her local Vice President. She insisted on being included in the negotiation dinner with their bankers. Her VP insisted that such a plan would result in them losing the funding for their next expansion (Wah 1998).

Like most women expats, Patrizia was single, and threw herself into her work abroad. In the US, Hong Kong, and London, she worked long hours and her social life was completely business-related. In Latin America, however, her hours and dedication were frowned upon by local colleagues, and her lack of personal life became a concern for her global management as well. Having no one to talk to about this increased her despondency. Having no one to talk to increased her sense of isolation.

A coach can create the space in which the woman expat can step back, reflect, and view the situation from her colleagues' perspectives. With this insight, she can overcome these gender–specific cultural barriers by devising appropriate behavioral strategies, and learn on–site even greater intercultural sensitivity. This being said, women expats' leadership skills, cultural savvy, and local adaptation remain key to the success of women in multinationals. Like men, women chosen for expat assignments should fulfill the qualities and characteristics required of such roles upfront (Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001; Rosinski 2003).

## Women expats and their organizations

Stefanie's functional expertise landed her the overseas role. But in their haste to get her on site, the company skipped over intercultural training in favor of immersion language classes. Once overseas, Stefanie's key asset, her expertise, was ignored when her behavior was viewed as inappropriate for her gender. She was then treated as a low-level employee by local management and clientele.

Lydia had traveled the globe for years, providing counsel for the firm's operations world-wide. But when she relocated to open up the new region, she found herself alone, with no one to fill the off hours or share her new experiences. Being single, she was invited once to each of her local colleagues' homes, but as the months passed, she felt increasingly isolated and shunned socially by her male colleagues, who were hesitant to share meals or make trips with her because she was a single woman:

I was anxiously fidgeting with the papers I was going to distribute when suddenly the general director appeared in front of me. He very kindly told me that they were looking forward to my intervention. They were resolving important issues and would appreciate the relaxation during my 10-minutes speech. He said he would call me in a few minutes. He then disappeared behind those large, heavy doors.

(Burrus 1997: 212)

Organizational support and mutual intercultural competence are key for expats and their host–country colleagues. Importantly, research confirms that helping the expat establish a full life experience in the host–country environment is pivotal to expatriate success. The adjustment is, of course, a family issue as well.

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## Women expats' families

> Alexandra was notified while traveling that her son had broken his leg at the football tournament. Her husband was presenting at a conference abroad too, so their in-country au pair was the only one to hold their son's hand at the hospital for the first few days. The parents' guilt and their son's loneliness, fear, and resentment frequently came up in subsequent family squabbles.
>
> Nina and her husband were grateful to have been home when their daughter was injured by a pedicab. But they did not trust the local medical care, staff, or facilities, and had a long and stressful ordeal trying to locate and move her to adequate care abroad while maintaining their work responsibilities.

The demands of family life for women in multinationals can be extremely stressful, particularly if a woman perceives herself as both caregiver and executive, struggling to strike a balance. This double bind is exaggerated in crisis situations such as those described above, and underscores the need for corporate support – funding, systems, and social networks – to fill the gaps and provide real-time resources for expat families: medical, legal, social, domestic, psychological, and community. Support networks will ease the pressure, but the prioritization process might be best facilitated by a coach.

## Women expats working with local host nationals

> Selena was astounded that her local director had set up the client briefing on the new line at a night club where the only women were scantily dressed on stage (Wah 1998).
>
> Even though she outranked him, the local manager insisted on having the final say in decision-making that was clearly within Inger's authority and beyond his (Wah 1998).
>
> When Rianna's local general manager introduced her to their key supplier, he thought Rianna was his secretary, and was confused when she joined them at the conference table (Tzeng 2006; Wah 1998).
>
> Nicola laughed when reflecting on how the local director had arranged for her to join the local management's wives on the city tour during the conference (Adler 1994).
>
> Nurit was refused a rental car in Indonesia because the locals were unaccustomed to a woman driving her own car; when she complained to her in-country supervisor, he suggested that her husband drive the car (Wah 1998).
>
> Only months later did Lourdes understand why business associates had canceled their scheduled meeting; they questioned her credentials and would not attend if the only company representative was to be a woman (Wah 1998).

Many of the challenges for international businesswomen result from gendered cultural differences perpetuated by local organizations and their business contacts in-country. The executive coach can assist the woman expat to develop strategies to address such discrimination. Also, the coach, in consultation with the client, may be well positioned to appropriately intervene with each of these stakeholder groups – the expat's organization, her family, and her local host colleagues – to facilitate a successful expatriate experience for all.

## Coaching women and their multinationals: tips and tools

The coaching relationship of course relies on managing expectations and delivering results responsive to the client's needs (Dagley 2006). Particularly in expat contexts, the organization and the individual assigned for coaching have a sense of urgency. Yet the coaching involves individual development, intercultural adjustment, and often organizational culture change, all of which, of course, take time and patience. Thus highlighting the process for the client company and individual can help to align expectations and facilitate the in-depth work that may be needed.

## THE COACHING PROCESS

Whether coaching the individual woman expatriate or the organization's CEO, expectations can be better aligned if the client understands that coaching follows a path of increasing individuation of the executive, progressively exploring

- The executive's environment – the strategies, structures, and systems through which the expat operates, and particularly status defense mechanisms;
- The executive's behavior – the expat's communication methods and styles, particularly when under stress;
- The executive's attitudes – the expat's beliefs and values, and how she sees the world;
- The deep structure of the executive – her character, defenses, and unconscious beliefs; and ultimately
- The deepest structure of the executive – the expat's core identity and spirit (Webb 2006: 70–1).

As in all coaching relationships, focus on the right problems, a relationship of trust, and the coaching process delineated above are central. Yet, beyond these basics, little research exists on this specialized intercultural coaching (Lowman 2007) or successful expatriate coping strategies (Stahl and Caligiuri 2005). And even as the metaphors evolve, many aspects of gender in management remain absent in research and thus not well understood (Broadbridge and Hearn 2008). So caution and care – without assuming transferability of home-country coaching practices – are of utmost importance (Lowman 2007).

As Doug Riddle, the Center for Creative Leadership's global director of coaching and feedback services, notes, 'A skilled coach allows leaders to *own* their own feelings, needs, and goals', which Riddle calls 'the modified Socratic technique' (Jenkins 2006: 24). While it may be tempting to focus on culture-specific education, and even on offending executives in the organization, expert coaching of course goes beyond supplying solutions, to examine underlying values and beliefs that drive behavior and culture (Jenkins 2006; Schein 1992).

## COACHING INDIVIDUAL WOMEN EXPATRIATES

First, women need to make clear their interest in international assignments. Women interested in such roles should prepare and educate themselves, not only on the expat track, but also in terms of language, intercultural competence, flexibility, and superior interpersonal skills.

Once chosen, women expats are foremost expected to do a job. Women's particular

leadership styles can be an advantage, including collaboration, a gentler approach, listening, relationship-building, willingness to share the credit, team play, becoming confidantes of male colleagues, patience, empathy, and sensitivity to cultural nuances (Eagly and Carli 2007; Helgesen 1990, 1995; Lipman-Blumen 1996; Wah 1998). Conversely, adopting men's leadership styles can backfire against women executives (Eagly and Carli 2007; Shames 1997; Wah 1998). Yet management and leadership remain culture-specific (Bennis 1989; Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001; Schein 2003; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998).

Prospective expats need training in not only language and customs, but also intercultural competence, a combination of specific, learned customs, and much more subtle, nuanced behaviors and sensitivites (Bennett 2004; Bennett and Bennett 2004; Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001; Rosinski 2003; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; Zakaria 2000). Expats often report that their learning further increases sensitivity and introduces humility, 'compared to those who have not been on a global assignment, these individuals "know what they do not know" ' (Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001: 33).

Coaching can also help expatriate leaders leverage their cultural intelligence, leadership styles, and knowledge of the importance of relationships, short-term profits, hierarchies, ethics, risk aversion, and other factors which vary from culture to culture, for example, the ability to establish relationships in China: *guanxi*.

Finally, whether single or married, with partner and/or children in-country or abroad, expats need to take care of themselves and their families. The issues are the same if a woman has no family; but if a woman has family, more responsibility falls on her, her trailing spouse is a more awkward issue than for men expats, and her networking needs are greater. The woman expat should push for and take advantage of all available support systems, and recognize that her professional success and adjustment depend on her personal adjustment and that of her family (Andreason 2003; Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi and Bross 1998; Caligiuri, Joshi and Lazarova 1999).

## INTERCULTURAL COACHING ON A GLOBAL SCALE

'Globally competent managers are critical for the success of all multinational organizations' (Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001: 27). Receptive expats, organizational leaders, and well-trained cross-cultural coaches can team up to help achieve this goal (Jenkins 2006; Rosinski 2003). These specialized coaches, like their clients, need to understand the nuances of the cultures involved, and score high on intercultural compentence themselves (Bennett 2004; Bennett and Bennett 2004; Caligiuri and DiSanto 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998).

My experience coaching women executives in multinational organizations has been most rewarding. Although men and women executives have many of the same issues, I have been surprised by how much more the coaching conversation with women executives revolves around relationships and the balancing act of personal and professional demands. Is my perception coming from a preconceived mindset that views women as equals, or does it stem from fact that I, too, am an outcome of a cultural upbringing which preceives women as more relational?

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