

Developing Global Readiness Before Leaving Home

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Tools for Building Deep Understanding and Partnerships Across Cultural, Political, and Economic Differences

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As organizations work to be more strategic and proactive in preparing employees for relocation to another country, there is increasing focus on what can be done on the homefront prior to departure. Cross-cultural training is typically the go-to option. However, as leadership roles have become more global—crossing over several countries and cultures—cultural training is not enough.

Global roles are fast-paced and filled with complexity. Cultural understanding is important but not the sole requirement. Leaders must also be knowledgeable about and skilled at adapting to diverse customer, competitive, political, and regulatory environments while navigating complex business realities.

In short, they need a strong global mindset. To maximize their success, employees need to begin their development prior to leaving their home countries. This article will describe research findings about the essential attributes of a global mindset and will provide suggestions to help employees develop global readiness now.

Essential Attributes of Global Leaders

In 2004, with the support of the Worldwide ERC® Foundation for Workforce Mobility, a rigorous research project began at the Najafi Global Mindset Institute at Thunderbird School of Global Management, a graduate school for international business, to identify and define the essential attributes of successful global leaders. The project tapped into the knowledge and experiences of world-renowned business professors and successful executives from around the globe.

Nine key dimensions of global leadership were identified and grouped into three categories: global intellectual capital, global psychological capital, and global social capital (see diagram, “Global Mindset”). Together, the dynamic interplay among cognitive, psychological, and behavioral attributes needed for global leadership constitutes a global mindset. According to the research, a global mindset is key to building deep understanding and partnerships across cultural, political, economic, and regulatory differences.

In 2007, this dynamic combination of cognitive, psychological, and behavioral attributes was transformed into a psychometric assessment instrument called the Global Mindset Inventory (GMI). More than 19,000 leaders around the globe have now taken the GMI to assess their readiness for global roles and responsibilities and to identify development opportunities.

Why Dynamic Learning Methods Matter for Global Roles

Thunderbird's recent research on how to develop a global mindset revealed that dynamic learning is not just about engagement; it is actually fundamental to global leadership development. Dynamic learning refers to the use of various educational methods that may include instructor-led training (e.g., classes, workshops, webinars), self-directed learning (reading, listening, watching, observing on one's own), social learning (informal conversations with peers, team workshops, mentoring by an expert), experiential learning (engaging in an activity or new experience, practicing specific skills and behaviors), and coaching (either being coached or coaching others). Dynamic learning is essential because each of the three kinds of capital within the global mindset is best developed through different methods and over varying lengths of time.

Global intellectual capital is enhanced largely through cognitive learning. It involves reading, watching, listening, analyzing, and problem-solving. Because enhancement of global intellectual capital tends to be self-directed, it can be built fairly quickly. Thunderbird School's research shows that leaders can make measurable improvements in only a few months.

On the other end of the spectrum, global psychological capital can take many months to develop, because it requires experience to tap into deep motivations and interests. It can be fostered through first-person experience combined with reflection on one's values, motivations, and confidence.

Development of global social capital depends on interactions with different kinds of people in order to practice and modify behaviors. This may include mentorships, peer interactions, discussions, and job shadowing. The speed at which one develops global social capital depends on the diversity of one's immediate network and motivation to make positive changes.

Practical Development Tips for Global Roles

The dynamic nature of global leadership requires dynamic learning methods. Thunderbird's research identified a number of effective ways for a leader to develop a global mindset along each dimension before going on assignment abroad. The suggestions, which have been used successfully by 13 experienced international executive coaches who served as research partners, are drawn from Thunderbird's *Developing Your Global Mindset: The Handbook for Successful Global Leaders*.

Developing Global Intellectual Capital

Global intellectual capital represents the cognitive side of leadership. It consists of global business savvy, cosmopolitan outlook, and cognitive complexity. Global business savvy is focused on knowledge of one's global industry, competitive business strategies, risk assessment, and supplier options. Cosmopolitan outlook is where cultural knowledge comes into play. It requires knowledge of geography, history, economic and political issues, and current events.

Cognitive complexity is what allows a leader to intellectually navigate complex issues. It consists of the ability to grasp complicated topics, analyze and solve problems, understand abstract ideas, and explain the main points of complex issues simply and understandably.

Here are 10 tips for developing global intellectual capital on the homefront:

Read how business is done in other cultures using country guides.

Watch or read popular media from other cultures of interest to see how people think and interact with one another.

Learn the language or parts of several languages of the regions where you will be working.

Participate in a global project team within your home country office to see global business savvy in action.

Ask to meet in person or virtually with employees who are nationals of the countries you'll be working with to understand how business is done in their cultures.

Read blogs from experts and people from other countries with different points of view.

Follow nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the regions of interest to understand the issues they are facing in specific countries.

Follow trade organizations in your industry to understand important world events as they affect your specific industry.

Ask to meet in person or virtually with stakeholders in your organization to discuss regional business issues from a strategic perspective.

Participate in global business simulations.

Developing Global Psychological Capital

Global psychological capital encompasses motivation, interest, and resilience for working in global roles. It takes into account passion for diversity, quest for adventure, and self-assurance. Passion for diversity is essentially a person's interest in working with different kinds of people. It captures the enjoyment of exploring other parts of the world and getting to know dissimilar colleagues. Quest for adventure is about a person's interest in working in new environments that may be challenging or unpredictable. Self-assurance is largely about resilience, in that it encompasses a person's ability to face challenging new situations with energy and confidence.

While direct experience in other cultures is certainly important for development, quite a few actions can be taken at home to strengthen adaptability and risk-taking, and to build a strong cross-cultural foundation:

Explore different parts of your own city or country.

Join social groups or professional organizations where you can interact with different kinds of people.

Try a new local activity to test your abilities.

Pursue your own passions across cultures (e.g., if you like music, listen to music from another culture of interest).

Plan ahead for ways to quickly start connecting with social life in the new country by scouting out social or philanthropic groups of interest and starting to develop your individual social network through virtual communication.

Assemble a support team, including a mentor, to help you before, during, and after your assignment.

Work with a consultant who has experience in the culture of interest.

Take good physical care of yourself to maintain consistent and peak levels of energy.

Mentally walk through situations you may encounter in the new culture, and ask an expert to help you prepare for situations in which you are uncomfortable.

Ask for feedback about your leadership style from trusted colleagues who are familiar with or native to the cultures of interest to you, and identify adaptation strategies as needed.

Developing Global Social Capital

Strong global psychological and intellectual capital is the foundation for success in a global role. This is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Relationships, however, are the motor that keeps business moving. Global social capital represents the behavioral side of the global mindset, where relationships are built. It consists of intercultural empathy, interpersonal impact, and diplomacy.

Intercultural empathy includes ability to emotionally connect with diverse individuals and to engage diverse teams to work together. Interpersonal impact encompasses leadership reputation, cross-cultural professional networks, and ability to negotiate agreements with different kinds of people. Diplomacy is a leader's ability to form new relationships, collaborate, and integrate diverse perspectives. Building strong global social capital from a distance is becoming easier through technology, especially social networking tools. These 10 tips can help:

Take assessments that measure your current cross-cultural competence and help you identify where to improve, so you may work better with different kinds of people.

Learn how to sincerely greet someone in the culture of interest, including some communication in the local language.

Find out what are typical and appropriate conversation starters in the culture of interest as well as topics to avoid.

Watch movies from and cross-cultural training about the culture of interest to see how people communicate and use gestures.

Increase the frequency of your interactions with your colleagues in the culture of interest.

Participate in a cross-cultural role-play with a coach with expertise in the culture of interest.

Grow your network through connections you already have by asking colleagues to connect you with their colleagues in the culture of interest.

Make efforts to connect with your business partners, suppliers, and customers in the culture of interest.

Study popular leaders in the culture of interest to see what is valued.

Learn about sources of influence across cultures.

Preparation for a global role need not be overwhelming. In fact, perfection in all areas of the global mindset is not the goal. It is much more important for an employee to choose development actions that align with the most critical capabilities necessary to feel comfortable and get off to a great start abroad. This begins with identifying where to place development efforts now and crafting an action plan that will help employees meet their goals before ever leaving home. M

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Coaching Others for Global Readiness

Managers and human resources development professionals play an important role as coaches to employees who are preparing to go abroad. Here are some ideas for fostering global readiness in others:

Provide sufficient background information and understanding of cultural and business issues in the region.

Encourage employees to keep current on important world events related to business in the region.

Create teaching moments about the region where the employee will be working, using storytelling, dialogue, presentations, and guest speakers.

Promote discussion of the cultural contexts of business issues, involving experts and natives of the cultures discussed.

During coaching sessions, ask open-ended questions about potential assignees' motivations and barriers to exploring other parts of the world.

Be a connector in your organization, creating ways to help others meet and get to know one another.

Facilitate a discussion on how to build trust across cultures.

Create opportunities for geographically dispersed teams to engage with one another.

Incorporate social time into global team meetings.

Provide coaching and resources for managing stress and anxiety.

The Dynamic Nature of Global Leadership Requires Dynamic Learning Methods

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