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Fred Bailey: An Innocent Abroad

Fred Bailey gazed out the window of his 24th floor office at the tranquil beauty of the Imperial Palace and its gardens amidst the hustle and bustle of downtown Tokyo. Only six months ago, Bailey had arrived with his wife and two children for this three-year assignment as the director of Kline & Associates' Tokyo office. Kline & Associates is a large, multinational consulting firm with offices in 19 countries worldwide. Bailey was now trying to decide if he should pack up and tell the home office that he was returning home, or whether he should somehow try to convince his wife (and himself) that they should stay and finish the assignment. Given how excited Bailey thought they all were about the assignment originally, it was a mystery as to how things had gotten to this point. As he watched the swans glide across the water in the moat that surrounds the Imperial Palace, Bailey reflected upon the past seven months.

Seven months ago, the managing partner of the main office in Boston, Dave Steiner, asked Bailey to lunch to discuss business. To Bailey's surprise, the "business" was not the major project that he and his team had just finished, but was instead a very big promotion and career move. Bailey was offered the position of managing director of the firm's relatively new Tokyo office which had a staff of 40, including seven Americans. Most of the Americans in the Tokyo office were either associate consultants or research analysts. As managing director, Bailey would be in charge of the entire office and would report to a senior partner who was in charge of the Asian region. It was implied to Bailey that if this assignment went as well as his past ones, it would be the last step before becoming a partner in the company.

When Bailey told Jenny, his wife, about the unbelievable opportunity, he was shocked at her less-than-enthusiastic response. She thought that it would be difficult for their children to live and go to school in a foreign country for three years, especially when Christine, the oldest, would be starting middle school next year. Besides, now that the children were in school, she was considering going back to work—at least part-time. Jenny Bailey had a degree in fashion merchandising from a well-known private university and had previously worked as an assistant buyer for a large women's clothing store.

Her husband explained that the career opportunity was just too good to pass and that the company's overseas package was generous enough to allow for a relatively luxurious lifestyle. The company would pay all the expenses to move whatever belongings the Baileys wanted to take with them. The company had a beautiful and spacious house located in an expensive district of Tokyo that would be provided to them rent-free, and the company would rent their house in Boston during their absence. Also, the company would provide a car and driver, education expenses for the children to attend private schools, and a cost-of-living adjustment and overseas compensation that would nearly triple Bailey's gross annual salary. After two days of consideration and discussion, Bailey told the managing partner, Dave Steiner, that he would accept the assignment.

The previous managing director was a partner in the company, but had only been in the new Tokyo office for less than a year when he was transferred to head a long-established office in England. Because the transfer to England was presently taking place, the Baileys were given about three weeks to prepare for the move. Between getting things at the office transferred to Bob Newcome, who was being promoted to Bailey's position, and the logistical

hassles of getting furniture and other belongings ready to be moved, the Baileys did not have much time to find out much about Japan and its culture.

When the Baileys arrived in Japan, they were greeted at the airport by one of the young Japanese associate consultants and the senior American expatriate. They were all tired from the long flight, and the two-hour limousine ride back to Tokyo was a quiet one. After a few days of becoming familiar with the new environs, Bailey spent his first day at the office.

Bailey's first order of business was to have a general meeting with all the employees of associate consultant rank and higher. Although he was not aware of this at first, the Japanese staff always sat apart from the American staff. After Bailey introduced both himself and his general ideas about the potential and future direction of the Tokyo office, he asked a few individuals for ideas about how their responsibilities would likely fit into his overall plan. From the American staff, Bailey received a mixture of opinions with specific reasons about why certain ideas might or might not fit well. From the Japanese staff, he only received vague answers and no outright opinions. When Bailey asked for more specific information, he was surprised to find that some of the Japanese staff made a sucking sound as they breathed and said that it was "difficult to say." Bailey sensed the meeting was not entirely fulfilling his objectives, so he thanked everyone for attending and said he looked forward to everyone working together to make the Tokyo office the fastest growing office in the company.

After they had been in Japan about a month, Fred's wife complained to him about the difficulty she had finding some everyday products like maple syrup, peanut butter, and quality cuts of beef. She said that when she could find these items at one of the specialty stores they cost three to four times what they would cost in the United States. She also complained that the washer and dryer were too small and that she had to spend extra money by sending clothes out to be dry-cleaned. Additionally, unless she went to the American Club in downtown Tokyo, she was never able to enjoy the company of English-speaking adults. After all, her husband was at the office 10 to 16 hours a day and their children were at school most of the day. Unfortunately, at the time of this discussion with his wife, Bailey was preoccupied with a big upcoming meeting between his company and a significant prospective client—a well-respected Japanese multinational company.

The next day, Bailey, along with the lead American consultant for the potential contract, Ralph Webster, and one of the Japanese associate consultants, Kenichi Kurokawa, who spoke perfect English, met with a team from the Japanese company. The Japanese team consisted of four members—the VP of administration, the director of international personnel, and two staff specialists. After shaking hands and a few awkward bows, Bailey said that he knew the Japanese team was busy and he did not want to waste their time, so he would get right to the point. Bailey then asked Webster to lay out their company's proposal for the project to include project costs. After the presentation, Bailey asked the Japanese clients for their reaction to the proposal. The Japanese did not respond immediately and so Bailey quickly launched into his summary version of the proposal, thinking that the translation might have been insufficient. But, again, the Japanese team had only the vaguest of responses to his direct questions.

His recollection of the frustration of that initial business meeting was enough to shake Bailey back to the reality of the situation. The reality was that, in the five months since that first meeting, little progress had been made and the contract between the companies had yet to be signed. "I can never seem to get a direct response from a Japanese person," he thought to himself. This feeling of frustration led him to remember a related incident that happened about a month after his first meeting with the Japanese client.

Bailey reasoned that little progress had been made because he and his group did not know enough about the client to package the proposal in a way that was appealing to them. Consequently, he called in the senior American associated with the proposal, Ralph Webster, and asked him to develop a research report on the client so the proposal could be reevaluated and tailored to better meet their needs. Jointly, they decided that one of the more promising Japanese research associates, Tashiro Watanabe, would be the best employee to take the lead on this report. To impress upon Watanabe the importance of this task and the great potential they saw in him, Bailey and Webster decided to have the young Japanese associate meet with them. During the meeting, they presented the nature and importance of the task. At that point, Bailey said to Watanabe, "You can see that this is an important assignment and that we are placing a lot of confidence in you by giving you this assignment. We need the report this time next week so that we can revise and re-present our proposal. Can you handle this?" After a somewhat pregnant pause, Watanabe responded hesitantly, "I'm not sure what to say." Bailey smiled, got up from his chair, and walked over to the young Japanese associate, extended his hand, and said, "Hey, there's nothing to say. We're just giving you the opportunity you deserve."

The day before the report was due, Bailey asked Webster how the research report was coming along. Webster said that since he had heard nothing from Watanabe, he assumed that everything was under control, but that he would double-check with him. Webster later met one of the American research associates, John Maynard, in the office hallway. He knew that Maynard was hired for the Tokyo office because of his Japanese language ability and that, unlike any of the other Americans, he often went out after work with some of the Japanese research associates, including Watanabe.

Webster asked Maynard if he knew how Watanabe was progressing on the report. Maynard then recounted that, last night at the office, Watanabe had asked if Americans sometimes fired employees for being late with reports. He had sensed that this was more than a hypothetical question and asked Watanabe why he wanted to know. Watanabe did not respond immediately and, since it was 8:30 in the evening, Maynard suggested they go out for a drink. At first Watanabe resisted, but then Maynard assured him that they could have a quick drink at a nearby bar and come right back to the office. At the bar, Maynard got Watanabe to express his concerns.

Watanabe explained the nature of the research report that he had been requested to produce. He went on to say that even though he had already worked many hours to complete the report, he found the task to be impossible; he had doubted from the beginning whether he could complete the report in a week.

At this point, Webster asked Maynard, "Why the hell didn't he say something in the first place?" Webster did not wait to hear whether Maynard had an answer to his question and headed to Watanabe's office. The incident then escalated as Webster lashed out at Watanabe and then went to Bailey explaining that the report would not be ready and that Watanabe did not think it could have been from the start. "Then why didn't he say something to us during the meeting?" Bailey demanded. No one had any clear answers, and the entire incident left everyone involved more suspect and uncomfortable with each other.

There were other incidents, big and small, that had made the last two months in Tokyo especially frustrating, but Bailey was too tired to remember them all. It seemed as if there was too much of a language and cultural gap between the Americans and the Japanese to overcome. Bailey felt that he could not communicate with his Japanese colleagues and that

he could not figure out what they were thinking. This drove him crazy and made him feel as if he was not a success in his new position.

Then, on top of all the work-related problems, his wife had laid a bombshell on him last evening. She wanted to go home, and yesterday was not soon enough. Even though the children seemed to be enjoying their stay in Tokyo, his wife was tired of being stared at, of not understanding anybody or being understood, of not being able to find what she wanted at the store, of not being able to drive and read the road signs, of not having anything to watch on TV, and of not being involved in anything. Because of her feelings of isolation, she wanted to return to the United States and to their previous life. She reasoned that they owed nothing to the company because the company had led them to believe this was just another assignment, like the two enjoyable years they had spent in San Francisco, and it was anything but that!

Bailey looked out the window of his office once more, wishing that somehow all the problems could be solved or that time could be turned back. Down below, the traffic was backed up in the always crowded Tokyo streets. Though the traffic lights changed, the cars and trucks did not seem to be moving. Fortunately, in the ground below the streets, one of the world's most advanced, efficient, and clean subway systems moved hundreds of thousands of people to their destinations about the city.

QUESTIONS

1. What factors (individual, work, and organizational) contributed to Fred and Jenny Baileys' lack of adjustment to Japan?
2. What mistakes did Bailey make at work because of his lack of understanding of the Japanese culture?
3. What criteria would be important in selecting employees for overseas assignments?
4. What special training and development programs might have been beneficial to Fred Bailey and his family prior to his assignment in Tokyo?
5. Imagine that you are Dave Steiner and you receive a telephone call from Bailey in which he talks about his difficulties adjusting to life in Tokyo. How would you respond? What should be done now?

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