

The Culture of Business - In Perspective

What Makes an I.R. Manager?

By: Stephen G. Wright

I want to give you a frame of reference as to what the qualifications of an "International Relationship Manager" should be. First you need to understand that this position is by definition a social one, not one of strategic policy formation, implementation, reform or a simple liaison function between you and your local partners or employees.

You are aware that from your basic training in management that there are "formal leaders" and "informal leaders" in any organization, and at varying levels. Also, you remember (I assume) the existence of "social leaders" within the daily activities of any organization. This is the type of person you need to first focus your attention on. An I.R. Manager must possess adaptive cross-cultural social skills and have a demonstrated ability to bring people together (coordinate, inspire and motivate).

Any conventional wisdom indicating that an MBA graduate is a sound choice would be a most risky decision indeed. This is because an MBA has not provided graduates with sufficient training in the required areas of competency for this position as it is defined.

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS:

1) Masters Degree in a Social Science. Highest priority should be for degrees in Sociology, Psychology or Organizational Behavior. Secondary consideration should be given for any undergraduate / graduate combination of Human Resource Management, Cultural Anthropology, History, Political Science, or International Relations and Management.

2) At least five to ten years of international field experience in any combination of the following departments: Human Resource Management and Development, Public Affairs / Public Relations, International Sales, International Logistics Management or Marketing.

3) A track record of institutional advancement from any type of entry level position up through the ranks to a management post. It is intended that an I.R.M. be a senior level position. This requires experience in order to be done effectively. Recent graduate students are not suitable for the level of interaction required and gained through years of relationship building and practical company awareness.

4) Strong references from people OUTSIDE of the candidates home country that can indicate the level of the candidates human interrelationship skills, personality type, and capability to handle the ambiguous.

There are various, and numerous, international competency “profile” indicators and cross-cultural capability assessments that your HR department can purchase to assist in evaluating candidates. If your HR people are not aware of these, have them do some internet searching for an afternoon or two! (Let me know if you cannot find them.)

As stated before the position in question forms a social function (Talk to local business people about the “socialization of business” if you do not understand what I mean.) between all the divisions and departments of your organization and those people that are your stakeholders in any nation outside your home base. My suggestion would be to speak with other expatriates to see what they are doing on this issue, if anything.

While teaching Cross-cultural Management at Johns Hopkins one semester two of my U.S. students worked at a firm (and in fact the course at that time was being held inside the company building) that had instituted a position very much as I have described for you. A few years prior, this firm and an international partner organization had been a client of mine for business communication strategies and understanding the U.S. culture seminars.

It was through my learning of their cutting edge approach (I.R.M.), that I was able to apply what I was previously teaching my students to a current operational technique. Since then I have been researching this approach and evaluating the concept. So, why not do a little research of your own and see what is happening out there?

Mr. Wright has 12 years of field experience in 5 nations of the F.S.U. Some of his clients for seminars in cross-cultural relations, business communication strategies and “Understanding the U.S. Culture for Strategic Advantage” include, Gazprom, The Ministry of Transportation and Defense of Saudi Arabia, Bechtel, USDA Graduate School, and Georgetown University. Between 1996 and 2002 Mr. Wright was a member of the Associate Faculty in the MBA Program at Johns Hopkins University, School of Professional Studies in Business and Education. In the 1979 Mr. Wright received his undergraduate degree in Political Science from The American University and in 1990 he completed graduate studies in Management at Cambridge College. He is now doing research for a Ph.D. in International Relations.

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