

Expatriate Coaching – Meeting the needs of Today's Expatriate Assignment

Expatriate assignments are not what they used to be. Surprised? Globalization has changed the dynamics of such an adventure for the expatriate employee as well as for the accompanying family. While these dynamics may have changed and will continue to change and the budgets to support the employee and family may have decreased, the fact still remains that these families require assistance to successfully transition, professionally and personally, into the host culture.

That being said, the question remains: Has the support provided to the expatriate and family changed and developed in line and with the same speed with the changing dynamics of today's expatriate assignment? The answer is somewhat gray but becoming clearer.

Traditional intercultural training continues to be offered by the majority of global organizations and continues to meet the objectives of the traditional expatriate assignment.

However, the fact is that more and more expatriate assignments fall outside of the traditional assignment. More and more people are accepting expatriate assignments and contracts in various and flexible forms – long-term, short-term, extended or repeated business trips, local-blend and local hires to name a few. As such, new strategies have had to develop to support these new types of assignments.

One of these new support strategies is expatriate coaching. While the idea of coaching is not new, customizing a coaching program specific to the needs of the expatriate is a relatively new offering.

Expatriate coaching is flexible in that it can begin at any time during the lifecycle of an assignment and complements other intercultural training programs, namely traditional expatriate and repatriation training. According to an internal report of the Personnel Management Association, when coaching is combined with training, individuals increase their Productivity by an average of 86% compared to 22% with training alone.

Providing on-going support via expatriate coaching also bridges the gap between traditional expatriate and repatriation training. Such pre and re-entry programs focus on practical information as well provide a picture of what to expect once in the host country, specifically how their adjustment process could look like.

Often times, however, this information is provided months before the expatriate and family actually finds themselves struggling with adjustment. During these times, the expatriate can find themselves managing the cultural adjustment process alone – and having a difficult time doing so. This is one of the main benefits of expatriate coaching in that the coach supports the expatriate exactly in the moment when it is needed, not only before or after adjustment issues have happened.

Expatriate coaching provides specific support for all involved in the assignment, including the employee as well as the accompanying spouse. For the employee, expatriate coaching can provide the chance to develop their global leadership capabilities as well as support and guide their career development to leverage their expatriate experience for future assignments and responsibilities.

For the accompanying spouse, expatriate coaching can provide career guidance as well as support in establishing a new routine in the host country by identifying goals and objectives during the time abroad as well as a road map of how to get there.

What Expatriate Coaching Is... And What It Is Not

There continues to be confusion around just exactly what coaching is and isn't and what it can and cannot provide for the expatriate family.

In a nutshell, it is a dialogue between the expatriate and the expatriate coach to establish values, beliefs and goals and to then identify a plan to meet these goals. An experienced and good coach asks the right questions and has the right tools and techniques to empower the expatriate to find the answers suitable for him/her. This is what makes the coaching relationship different than a consulting relationship.

As so many cultural misunderstandings while on assignment start out as a result of a misinterpreted understanding of a particular situation, many expatriate coaches provide various perspectives of the situation to broaden the possibilities of what else could have happened or was intended.

Different than therapy, coaching is grounded in the present and the future and not the past. As such, coaching creates action-oriented goals. Coaching provides the opportunity to receive immediate feedback from a trusted and non-judgmental person. A safe and trusted space is created for the expatriate to try out new behaviors and strategies before implementing them in the host country work environment or in a personal setting.

The role of a coach is to walk by the expatriates' side, if you will, and provide motivation, inspiration, and tools to keep the expatriate in action. Expatriate coaches have heightened listening skills (in hearing what was said as well as what was not said), are able to provide personal and professional development tools and have personal enjoyment in helping expatriates to define and meet their personal and professional goals while on assignment.

As the life of an expatriate is constantly in change – emotionally as well as physically, expatriate coaching has is delivered in a flexible manner. Face-to-face, telephone, e-mail – all are suitable options for receiving expatriate coaching, based on the logistical realities as well as the needs and desires of the expatriate.

As expatriate training continues to provide employees and their families with the practical information and a picture of what to expect upon arrival, expatriate coaching provides in-the-moment support and meets the expatriate exactly where they are at that particular moment. Exactly what is needed for today's changing expatriate and their family.

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