

September 1987

How to Pick Your "Man in Asia"

Arthur M. Whitehill
University of Hawaii

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sbr>



Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitehill, Arthur M. (1987) "How to Pick Your "Man in Asia"," *Southern Business Review*. Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sbr/vol13/iss2/7>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Southern Business Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

HOW TO PICK YOUR "MAN IN ASIA"

Arthur M. Whitehill

Not everyone agrees that the next hundred years will be the "Century of the Pacific." But most will admit that the Pacific-Asian nations have emerged as the fastest-growing part of the world. Today, though Japan may not be Number One among industrial nations, she surely ranks as Number Two. And increasingly the Japanese are feeling the hot breath of Korea on their necks — with Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore not far behind. Adding to this economic powerhouse are more than a billion Chinese who are making a strong bid to enter the race.

There is no escaping one conclusion: American and European managers must join the crowd or get left behind. Not hundreds, but thousands of Western businessmen will have to spend a considerable part of their careers living and working in that corridor of nations stretching from India to Japan. Regional offices, subsidiaries, and joint ventures will have to be staffed by the brightest, most dedicated, and highly motivated expatriate managers that can be found.

This raises a new and difficult challenge for many corporations as they increasingly internationalize their business. Put in the simplest terms: How can they pick the real winners to successfully carry their company flag to foreign shores? Is a winner at home sure to be a winner there? Or is there a very special breed of executive needed to deal with the tough problems faced by expatriates throughout the world?

I asked these questions of personnel officers in more than a dozen large international corporations in New York City. The companies represented such diverse industries as electronics, petroleum, pharmaceuticals, and banking. All were successful in the sense that they had survived the rigors of global competition for more than a decade. And all had operations in one or more Pacific-Asian nations.

These human resources experts had won some—and lost a few—in their efforts to select managers for foreign assignments. The winners had spelled profits. Losers had created acute frustration and required substantial expenditures of time and money to select and train replacements. On the basis of their real-world experience, they identified four categories of qualifications considered essential for success: (1) technical competence; (2) cross-cultural knowledge; (3) a unique "mix" of physical and personality traits; and (4) language ability. Let us look at each of these recommendations.

Technical Competence

First, and most important, is technical competence in the sense of unquestionable ability to do one's job. If the candidate is in accounting and finance, he must be the greatest financial wizard around. Or if he is an engineer, he must be the best engineer ever encountered by his foreign hosts. Whatever his specialty, his performance must be outstanding.

There are two reasons why a candidate should have an excellent track record at home before being turned loose in Taipei, Tokyo or Singapore. Any foreign assignment, particularly in a culture very different from one's own, is full of surprises. The expatriate, therefore, simply does not have the time or energy to

sharpen his basic job skills when each day brings some new, unexpected crisis. Furthermore, his credibility with foreign managers must be impeccable. An impressive past record of achievement will go far toward impressing his hosts that they are, indeed, dealing with an expert.

To illustrate the element of surprise so common in overseas assignments, a few examples may be helpful. Take the matter of engineering standards which are by no means universal in nature. Standards in Asian countries may be European or American depending largely upon historical association. Even with respect to contracts, which Westerners believe to be binding in every respect, Asian companies may ignore a key clause simply because "circumstances have changed" since signing the agreement.

On a less serious scale, there are the many "little surprises" encountered every day in a foreign assignment. For example, the concept of time may vary widely among different cultures. In many Asian countries, a meeting called for ten will convene at twelve—with no apology for the delay. And there always are the surprises arising from semantics—that is, differences in the meanings of words. An answer assumed to be "yes" may turn out to be "no," or at best "we will give the matter further thought."

Turning to the requirement of unquestioned credibility, one further comment may be in order. In almost all cases the expatriate manager is viewed as an outsider, stranger, who is guilty until proven innocent. His suspected sins run the gamut from personality defects, such as rudeness, naivete, or obnoxious informality, to total ignorance of his hosts' culture, language and values.

In spite of all this going against him, the visitor from abroad may still enjoy grudging respect if he obviously knows something that his hosts do not know. The role of an expert goes far in overcoming prejudices and distrust. It is for this reason that the international personnel executives questioned were unanimous in their conviction that technical competence was the most important criterion in selecting their managers for overseas assignments.

Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Next on their list of most-needed qualifications is a deep and sensitive understanding of cultural differences. It might be easy to assume that this refers only to a knowledge of the **foreign** environment within which the expatriate must live and work. But equal priority was given to knowing a great deal about one's own country. As one personnel officer expressed it, "Our people have to be good business ambassadors when we send them abroad."

Western Culture. What sorts of knowledge about their own countries should these corporate ambassadors possess? Anyone who has traveled in a status other than that of casual tourist knows the many tough questions that may be asked. History, literature, economic policies, social customs, TV and stage personalities, and politics all are fair game. The role of NATO, the mystery of Swiss bank accounts, or basic questions concerning geography are favorites when Asians interact with European visitors. And an all-time puzzler for American managers is when their hosts want to know all about the incredible electoral-college system for choosing presidents.

Then there are the endless questions about the visitor's home-country business

culture. How are important corporate decisions made? How much, and on what basis are executives paid? Are their country's top managers really "mercenaries" who will desert their company and move to a competitor who will offer a higher salary? What is meant by the popular phrase, "golden parachute," in explaining the termination of top corporate executives?

These can be awkward questions for the already harried expatriate manager. A shocking discovery of many well-intentioned but only slightly informed business travelers is that their hosts seem to know more about Germany, France, or the United States than do the representatives of these countries. This is not only acutely embarrassing, but it also does little to assure that important aura of credibility mentioned earlier.

Foreign Culture. Turning to the expatriate's knowledge of the host country, this increasingly is considered a top priority by leading international corporations. But for the majority of busy executives, the pressure of their jobs has prevented them from doing their homework, and their familiarity with Pacific-Asian nations is superficial at best.

This is true even with respect to Japan—perhaps the most researched and documented nation in the world. Unfortunately, much of the information on Japan's management system tends to be superficial or, in some cases, misleading. No less an authority than William G. Ouchi in his best-selling book *THEORY Z* stated that "Upon reaching age fifty-five, all employees except the top few who are managing directors of the firm must retire." The fact is, the majority of Japanese employees now retire close to age sixty. In the same book he claims that "there is no pension or social security" in Japan. But Japan does have a comprehensive and sophisticated social security system.

To achieve up-to-date, cross-cultural understanding is not an easy task. For global salesmen, moving from one country and culture to another every few days, it is an impossible goal. But for those expatriate managers who are assigned to a single foreign country for an extended period of time, it is an achievement which can mean the difference between success and failure.

A few tips on negotiating in Asian nations will illustrate the need for careful, cross-cultural preparation:

1. Chinese executives absolutely demand technical competence. Many Western companies in China have had to delay business operations in order to call in more highly-qualified technicians.

2. A key requirement in Korean business is **kibun**, meaning inner feelings or mood. A Korean will not do business with a person who has offended his inner feelings.

3. Business cards always are used in Japan when one businessman meets another. They should be a standard pattern and size to fit Japanese filing systems and must have square corners since round corners are used only by women. They should be bilingual and presented Japanese side up, with the printing facing the receiver.

4. In The Philippines, a common saying, **bahala na** or God wills it, indicates that success is considered more a matter of fate than individual merit.

5. In Indonesia, there is an ancient and "honorable" custom of using "speed money" to grease financial deals.

6. Malays view life as a passing thing, and to avoid personal chitchat or show

too much concern for profits can lead to total rejection.

The Business Council for International Understanding estimates that international personnel who go abroad without cross-cultural preparation have a failure rate ranging from 33-66 percent. This is in contrast to less than two percent for those who had the benefit of such training. Fortunately, many international companies entering the Pacific/Asian market now realize the crucial importance of in-depth cross-cultural knowledge for their representatives.

Physical and Personality Traits

What physical characteristics, personal values, and behavior patterns are needed by your "Man in Asia"? There is little doubt that an overseas assignment is not for everyone in an international organization. A special "mix" of traits seems to contribute to expatriate success.

Little need be said about the tremendous importance of good physical and mental health. A foreign assignment naturally means changes in climate, diet, and exercise habits. The difficult adjustment to a new environment leaves little time for medical treatment or therapy. Furthermore, medical practices in Asia frequently conflict sharply with those in the West. Japanese physicians, for example, typically double as pharmacists. In many Asian hospitals, a family member is expected to stay with the patient and help with his care. And it is by no means unusual for patients to tip their doctor upon completion of treatment.

Beyond basic good health, there are a number of personality traits which seem to contribute to acceptance by one's foreign hosts. Patience already has been discussed. Humility would also stand high on the list of desirable traits. The humbling experience of Asian competition during the past several decades should help Western managers take a more modest view of their own wisdom and superiority.

Because international business is so extremely difficult and results are slow to be realized, an expatriate manager must be a "persistent optimist." A well-known joke defines a pessimist as an optimist who has been informed of the facts. In turn, we might define a persistent optimist as one who remains optimistic **after** being informed. Gloom and doom have no place in dealing with difficult international negotiations.

A particularly valuable trait for the expatriate manager is a high tolerance for silence. Europeans and Americans tend to be more articulate, more outspoken, and find long periods of silence almost unbearable. Many Asians, on the other hand, will consider the prolonged silences in negotiations to be the most productive time. A Japanese friend once commented "You Westerners like the expression 'Don't just sit there. . . do something.' We Japanese would reverse it and say 'Don't just do something. . . sit there.' " Sitting in silence while considering the full range of alternatives in a difficult situation will earn high marks for the expatriate dealing with Asian counterparts.

A healthy respect for age is another personal characteristic that is appreciated by Asian managers. In most Oriental cultures the age/wisdom equation still prevails. Older executives are considered wiser, and thus should be recognized first and listened to with an awe approaching reverence. Even in exchanging business cards, it is an unwritten rule that a visitor should present his card first to the oldest person among his hosts. It is difficult for managers from America

and other youth-centered cultures of the West to accept this deference to age.

A final comment has to do with dress codes. Asians typically put more stress upon non-verbal communication than do Westerners. And dress is one of the most powerful forms of such communication. For example, the Japanese salaryman's "uniform" is a dark suit, white shirt, dark tie, and highly-polished black shoes. While total conformity is not expected of foreign businessmen, very loud clothing does create the feeling that the visitors are not taking the negotiations seriously. Other countries have somewhat less formal dress requirements. But it is good advice for the expatriate to leave the wild sport coats, aloha shirts, and splashy ties at home.

Language Ability

The last criterion for success in an Asian assignment is the expatriate's command of his hosts' native language. In all cases, personnel officers concerned with selecting overseas representatives mentioned this requirement last. This does not imply that they consider it least important. But it does reflect the general feeling that language ability is the most difficult and elusive qualification to find among candidates for foreign assignments.

Most of my New York contacts agreed that the best of all worlds would be one in which applicants would excel with respect to the qualifications already discussed **and** be fluent in the language of the particular country to which they are assigned. But this is not likely to happen. Since technical competence is the controlling criterion, each opening abroad will require a particular type of specialist. The chances are slight that the specialist also will be fluent in the language of the country involved.

A recent case points up this dilemma. A large telecommunications company in the United States had opened a regional office in Taipei. A multimillion dollar contract upon which the company was bidding required a top-notch expert in management information systems. The assignment to Taiwan would be for at least three years. Searching its human resources in the head office, the ideal candidate was found—in terms of technical ability. He was also proficient in a foreign language—in this case, Spanish! A perfect match between the expertise required and the appropriate language ability is very hard to find.

Perhaps the most misleading and overworked expression in international business is, "Don't worry. . . they all speak English." It is true that the language of international business is English. But it is also true that the colleagues with whom an expatriate must work, day in and day out, will not all be able or willing to "work in English." Being confined to those foreign executives who can handle **managerial** English means being limited to a small, and usually atypical, group of associates.

Only a handful of mature managers in European or American companies are proficient in Chinese, Japanese, or other Asian language. The course followed by most international companies, therefore, is to pick the best person available for foreign assignments—in terms of technical skills, cultural knowledge, and appropriate personality "mix"—and then plunge that person into an intense, total-immersion type of language program **if** time permits. Furthermore, most companies now wisely demand that the expatriate continue study of the foreign language throughout his foreign assignment. A minimum time spent on such study

typically is one hour of classroom study before or after each work day. This is not an easy burden for already overworked managers to carry, but it will contribute immensely to their credibility, acceptance, and effectiveness on the job.

There was a clear consensus among the human resources experts interviewed that selecting a "Man in Asia" can not follow the model for selecting a person for a domestic assignment. Mistakes are extremely costly, and securing replacements takes a great deal of time. The four categories of qualifications they consider essential for success provide at least a rough guide to what is needed in the tough arena of international business.

Meeting these requirements can not guarantee that you will have a winner in that important position overseas. But profiting from the experiences of these seasoned international executives surely can cut down the failure rate. With these basic qualifications, both the expatriate and his home office can feel comfortable knowing that a very special person has been selected who has a better-than-even chance to succeed in Korea, Japan, Taiwan or any other nation in the most exciting and challenging part of the shrinking business world.

References

Harris, P.R. and Moran, R.T. **Managing Cultural Differences**. Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1987.

Ouchi, W.G. **Theory Z**. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981.

Whitehill, A.M. and Takezawa, S. **Work Ways: Japan and America**. Tokyo: The Japan Institute of Labour, 1981.

Whitehill, A.M. **The New American Executive**. Taipei: Harvard Management Services, Inc., 1986.

Zimmerman, M. **How To Do Business With The Japanese**. New York: Random House, 1985.

Arthur M. Whitehill is Professor of International Management at the University of Hawaii. He is also a member of the Affiliate Faculty of the Japan-America Institute of Management Science in Honolulu.