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Sustaining Successful Corporate Culture in a Global Sea of Change

By S. R. Liberty



This month I am going to shift the focus of my comments away from entrepreneurship and building a new regional economy to an intriguing and significant challenge facing highly successful U.S. companies with global markets and operations. Consider the following.

Company X has achieved great success over several decades in developing global markets and establishing global operations. This company attributes much of its success to its corporate culture. The company has done a great job over the years of exposing upward bound U.S. born managers to other regions of the world by rotating them through assignments in foreign countries where they learned the culture of their markets and the nuances of recruiting and managing workforces drawn from within those countries. Company X has also made special efforts to provide both language and cultural training for its U.S. born managers prior to these assignments. The executive suites of Company X are now heavily populated with leaders who have international experience. This model has also served Company X reasonably well by ensuring that its internal corporate culture has been propagated throughout its international operations.

Looking forward, Company X sees that within a decade most of its current executives and upper level managers will have retired. Also, the magnitude of its international business and operations is becoming so great that it is inevitable that many of its leadership positions will have to be populated with individuals from other countries. Company X now realizes that sustaining its extremely successful corporate culture, as it employs more and more people from different value systems and different cultural perspectives, is one of its greatest challenges. Although there are undoubtedly several ways of approaching this challenge I would like to point to what I believe is a solution to this dilemma. The solution is: co-operative education of international students.



True co-operative education (commonly confused with other forms of work integrated learning such as internships) contains the following elements. It consists of the integration of two different learning environments – one academic and the other in a company. Co-op students alternate between these two learning environments throughout several of their college years. Co-op students mature very rapidly. When properly utilized by their co-op employers, they develop a systemic understanding of their employing companies – they know how the dots are connected – and they are deeply immersed in and assimilate the company's culture during their educational years. Upon graduation the majority of them are employed as professionals by their co-op employers. Co-op graduates not only have knowledge, they know how to apply it. Co-op graduates are retained by their employers longer than other college graduates. Co-op graduates advance more rapidly within the organization because of their already developed understanding of the organization; and co-op graduates frequently rise to leadership positions within their employing organizations.



It seems natural then to apply this model of workforce education and training to Company X's dilemma. The solution is simple. Company X partners with one or more U.S. co-op institutions. The co-op institutions, in partnership with Company X, recruit qualified international students from the regions where Company X has operations. These students enroll in one of the co-op institutions. The students come to the United States on F-1 visas and after nine months of academic preparation they begin their alternating co-op experiences with the company in the United States. When the international co-op student successfully completes their degree program, Company X is in position to offer professional employment to the graduate within its operations in the graduate's home country. And, that employment decision only has to be made if Company X is satisfied that the prospective employee has assimilated its corporate culture and developed the employee characteristics it desires. Company X can be confident of its decision because it has had ample opportunity to observe the development of the employee during their co-op

experiences. This approach has minimal risks and it solves Company X's problem of sustaining its successful corporate culture while increasing its international workforce.

At Kettering University, where we provide the nation's most advanced co-operative education in all of our degree programs, we are now beginning to promote this approach with our corporate partners. Co-op education seems to offer solutions to many of the difficulties companies face in building a domestic and global work force of the highest quality. There are other colleges and universities that offer co-op education in a variety of formats, but it is safe to say that co-op education is not as prevalent as it needs to be to serve the nation's corporate needs.

If any of you want to know more about co-operative education in general, or at Kettering (www.kettering.edu) specifically, do not hesitate to contact me at sliberty@kettering.edu.

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