

**M**ANY OF US DOING BUSINESS INTERNATIONALLY, especially expatriate families with children, are familiar with the term “Third Culture Kids” or “TCKs.” “Third culture” is a term first coined by sociologists Ruth Hill Useem and John Useem in the 1950s. The pair traveled to India to study the lives of Americans who lived and worked there as foreign service officers, missionaries, aid workers, business people, educators and journalists, and also observed how they interacted with other expatriates.

They called the culture from which the adults came the first culture (e.g., American), and the host culture where the family lived the second culture (e.g., Indian). The third culture is the blend of both, experienced by non-native residents who are internationally mobile. That lifestyle can’t be completely described either by where they’re from or where they live. Children in such a “third culture” travel

ful pull to others who have had a similar third culture experience.

These people can see across borders. They tend to be very unconscious of skin color and race, and their experience defines their sense of identity and their world view. What they have in common, having lived internationally, is far more important than the differences between specific countries or cultures.

Even the sense of dislocation can bind TCKs from different backgrounds, says David Gruppo, a Google Fellow in New York who spent most of his youth in South America. He found that he shared with other TCKs from the US a lack of knowledge about, for instance, American football. Later, in the professional world, Mr. Gruppo served a long stint as Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi’s head of Latin American corporate and investment banking; his multi-cultural experience provided an enormous advantage. He loved meetings involving a multiplicity of languages.

TCKs are more flexible, he says, because “when

Like people, companies at home in multiple cultures are better able to handle the challenges of a global business community, says Brunswick’s **GINNY WILMERDING.**

# THIRD CULTURE

back and forth between places and experience reality differently than those who don’t, according to Ruth Van Reken and David C. Pollock who wrote the definitive book *Third Culture Kids*. Former President Barack Obama (born to an American mother and Kenyan father, raised partly in Indonesia) and US founding father Alexander Hamilton (born in Nevis to a half British, half French mother and a Scottish father, came to America for education as a teenager) are both examples of TCKs.

Ms. Van Reken has written about the pros and cons of people who live as expatriates – on the positive side, they may have increased confidence and adaptability; negatives can include feelings of rootlessness and confused loyalties. But one of the most intriguing things she has documented is that a TCK growing up as an expatriate in one country feels a profound empathetic connection to a TCK who holds a different passport and lived somewhere else. Many adults who have lived and worked in other countries for years will say the same. Research and anecdotes show that completely diverse and culturally different people feel a power-

you live in different places you’re fine with doing things in different ways. Social cultures are often opposite in one country versus another. So you’re less inclined to tell someone from a different culture, ‘You’re doing it wrong.’ No, they’re doing it differently.”

## BUSINESS BETWEEN WORLDS

What are the lessons for companies? So many multinationals are global by the numbers, but struggle to build a healthy and unified global culture among their managers.

We’ve all seen the failures: Western expatriates who don’t always respect or assimilate into Eastern cultures, and vice versa. People and companies in a foreign place who create division instead of collaboration. But the successes are inspiring: a cohesive third culture can power companies forward in a globalized world and give them an edge over peers.

If we believe that globalization is unstoppable and a force for good, what does that mean for global corporate culture? Here are some thoughts on what aspiring “third culture companies” can do to build an authentic global culture in their firms:



# COMPANIES

## are Built for the Future

- Hire TCKs into leadership positions. TCKs tend to be open-minded, flexible and mobile.
- Hire foreign nationals at home, where they can learn the corporate culture, and then go abroad to be carriers of a diverse culture, either in their country of origin or somewhere else.
- Hire “home country” nationals who are already overseas (they are likely to be TCKs already).
- Build a robust secondment and rotation program. Encourage everyone of a certain level in the company to seek one or more global assignments. Remind those with families that good schools and housing solutions do exist, and global mobility is not only possible but rewarding.
- Be tolerant of imperfect English, and respect the talent of and daily demands shouldered by multilingual employees. Even if English is the corporate *lingua franca*, you can’t survive globally without highly proficient speakers and writers of foreign languages. Treasure them.
- Encourage all of your employees to experience being a minority somewhere, for some length of time. There’s great value in moving beyond the comfort

of one’s own ethnic group, and in learning how to blend in and feel comfortable despite being different.

- Invest in bringing your diverse employees together. Save enough travel budget for some form of global meetings, task forces and team building that can bring diverse people together. In these, they can discover what binds them and also may suddenly realize that their home country perspective is limiting.
- Help the adventurous reassimilate. Living and working abroad and then returning to one’s home office can be profoundly disorienting and lonely. Support the returnees, too.

What happens when a company embraces global diversity and ensures its global employees experience multiculturalism up close and personal can be magic. For many, diversity is no longer an obligatory panel discussion, but becomes a treasured part of daily life and learning. That is the secret sauce for the successful international company of the future. ♦

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