

FRIENDSHIPS – AN UNSEEN CHALLENGE FOR GLOBAL LEADERS

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In the past 20 years, the global economy has become more and more global. People, as well as products and services, are crossing borders more frequently. Many leaders relocate to new nations and continents, some for short-term stints of 1- 3 years, others for longer. These moves enable them to develop the cross-cultural awareness and a “global mindsets” that are vital to their careers as leaders and to globalizing their organizational culture. Their organizations invest considerably in these moves, both in their physical relocation and in providing training and coaching that helps leaders succeed in their cross-cultural assignments.

There is one factor in these leaders’ success that is often overlooked, friendships. Relationships are one the foundations of the cross-cultural living experience. Psychologists and philosophers as far back as Aristotle cited the importance of friendships to well-being and to sound decision making. Friendships provide emotional and social support that enhances self-confidence, strengthens human connection and gives perspective to one’s life.

Mark Vernon writes in his book, that a close friend is a mirror of your own self, someone with whom you realize that, though autonomous, you are not alone. He adds that friendship is also important because it “cultivates the virtues, such as creativity and compassion, which are essential to a flourishing society.”

Friendships also speed the learning of the new culture. Friends can teach us the pulse of a culture. They can show us what people are interested in, what they value, and give us clues about tastes and trends. They can give us valuable experience how to best relate to people in this new land. They can even teach us the idioms that demonstrate that we are part of the new culture.

Many expatriate leaders move with their spouses. While the spouse can provide connection and emotional support, there is a risk that the couple can become an isolated dyad in the foreign land. They can experience a kind of loneliness and shared isolation that leads to unhappiness and insecurity.

Forming friendships is harder in a new land. Many friendships are based on commonality and shared values and interests. In one’s home country there are many people with similar backgrounds, often with shared childhood experiences, comparable schooling, similar religious backgrounds and economic/business cultures. In a new country, most of these will be different. So forming new friendships may not involve an attraction of similarities, but rather the extra effort of appreciating differences. On top of that, friendships are not something in which the organization can provide much help, like with housing, taxes, or training.

Some leaders may fill the extra time they gain from not socializing with more work. This might lead to some short-term productivity, but can eventually lead to burn out and a loss of perspective. (One client began to resent and criticize staff members for not working 14-hour days like he did.)

There is considerable research on the correlations between friendships and health, positive mood and even longevity. While I haven’t found any formal research on the relationship between friendships and leader performance, my own work with clients who have relocated has shown two things:

- Leaders who relocate from foreign countries have fewer friends than geographical “natives”.
- This paucity of friendships can lead to loneliness and reduced self-confidence.

Why might this be the case? Friends provide us with feedback about ourselves, and often confirmation of our personality style and ideas. Without these friends, we have to rely only on feedback from ourselves and possibly our partner. This shortage of confirmation can silently whittle away self-confidence.

So what can be done? Organizations can help by reminding global leaders of the importance of relationships outside of work. They can encourage these leaders, and their families, to seek out social relationships through venues like athletics, hobbies, and religious or education-based groups.



References

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