Why marginalized expats make great global leaders

"Marginalized biculturals" — individuals who belong to more than one culture, yet do not identify strongly with any of them — can excel at global leadership.

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People who have lived in more than one culture but who don't identify strongly with any of them are sometimes viewed as poor adapters, psychologically overwhelmed or socially weak.

Such typecasting would seem to make so-called "marginalized biculturals" less than ideal candidates to be global leaders, who need to be masters of connecting with and influencing many different people. Global leaders frequently encounter greater levels of diversity, complexity and uncertainty in their business dealings. Not a job, you would think, for "socially weak" types.

However, Stacey R. Fitzsimmons of Western Michigan University, IESE's Yih-teen Lee and Mary Yoko Brannen of INSEAD seek to challenge such notions. Indeed, their article, "Demystifying the Myth about Marginals: Implications for Global Leadership," argues that "marginalized biculturals" may, in fact, outperform as global leaders.

Caught between two cultures

According to social identity theory, how we see ourselves and how we identify with others can have a profound effect on our mental processes, emotions and behavior. This is especially pertinent in the case of immigrants and long-term expatriates caught between one or more cultural settings.

While some "go native," others may fail to identify strongly with either their home or host

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environment.

These latter types are known as the "marginals." They are considered bad candidates for global leadership roles.

Yet, according to the authors, these "marginals" are unique in their ability to understand and interact as cultural insiders, while simultaneously feeling like outsiders.

Bridging cultural divides

Rather like cross-cultural negotiators, "marginals" have the ability to see how their own positions or tactics may be perceived by others.

Furthermore, their lack of strong identification with any one cultural group makes them particularly adept at handling diversity.

"Marginals" also have a high level of tolerance for uncertainty, thanks to their constant state of in-betweenness.

They are also less likely to suffer from identity conflicts and be more open to new ideas.

Because they do not attach themselves to specific cultural groups, they may be better equipped to lead diverse teams and build trust in multicultural contexts than managers with only one cultural reference point.

When faced with unfamiliar cultural or business cues, they are less likely to take a defensive stance and more willing to try to understand them.

In short, as both cultural insiders and outsiders, "marginals" are free to embrace a cosmopolitan and global mind-set. They are able to stay neutral and detached in cross-cultural settings and can build social relationships more easily with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Even if they later go on to integrate themselves within their adoptive society, they still retain these special skills.

It takes a special kind

Having said that, not all "marginals" become global leaders. For some, there is an active rejection of both cultures: This does not serve the cause of global leadership.

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But those who have a healthy self-awareness, and have learned to embrace this state of in-betweenness, are best able to develop global leadership potential.

Since "marginalized biculturals" represent a relatively small percentage of the population, it would be impractical for organizations to recruit on this basis alone.

However, if you consider "marginalization" as a process — i.e., people going through identity construction with respect to two or more cultural groups — then the candidate pool widens considerably.

Unique skill sets

The authors list several things that such people bring to the table.

- *They can be responsible.* They take little for granted and can see things that others miss. They are also more likely to take on the role of devil's advocate, which is so essential for responsible global leaders.
- *They can be unconstrained*. With little expectation of conforming to the norm, they can switch between being unconstrained by their local environment while at the same time having a deep understanding of it.
- *They can be* "*change agents*" *for continuous improvement.* Outsiders can often see what those at home take for granted. For example, when Tesco began to lose competitiveness in its home market, it invited a team of Asian managers from its subsidiaries to cast their eyes on its home operations and identify improvements.

Training global leaders is an expensive, long and uncertain process. While skills and abilities can be developed over time, personality characteristics are much harder to change.

It makes sense, therefore, for organizations to invest just as much time into assessing and acknowledging the often hidden skills sets of biculturals when recruiting potential global leaders.

Organizations should pay more attention to these profiles as unique contenders for global leadership positions, say the authors.

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