



THUNDERBIRD

GLOBAL MINDSET INSTITUTE

The Curious Case of David Akey

David Akey really did not know what to think, let alone what to do, next. He sat at his desk thinking about how things had gone in the past two months since his first meeting with his direct reports. As the new general manager for China in the consumer products division of his U.S. based employer, he had arrived in Beijing energized to expand business in what his bosses back home kept telling him was the fastest growing market in the world. It sounded so easy. All he had to do was to better integrate the different parts of the China operations to achieve the needed efficiencies.

When he arrived, David had been very hopeful because he recalled all he had heard about how “collectivistic” the Chinese were. But he had also been a little leery after hearing his returning U.S. predecessor say that the employees’ “groupishness” was actually part of the problem in building a well-coordinated operation and that whenever he talked to them about it, they could not be more polite but rarely changed how they did things.

David recalled the first meeting he had with his Chinese team. He had emphasized the need for cross functional integration and even referred to the problems they were having because marketing and sales were making delivery promises to customers that operations and distribution could not meet. In the spirit of collectivism, he had established a cross functional team to address this problem, and others. Well, 60 days had passed, and coordination was no better. He had attended a couple of meetings and was struck by how things had evolved. Turf protection by function was more pronounced than anything he had ever seen in the States! The folks in each function were zealous about taking care of their own group, but indifferent to the other groups, even though they all spoke to one another in the nicest and most formal, polite and supportive of terms. Unfortunately, David was not seeing much improvement.

David was struggling to make sense of his cross cultural experience, a stretch assignment that was supposed to be so good and developmental for him! Instead, he was feeling very frustrated and having a hard time coming to grips with the whole experience, both inside and outside the workplace. He recalled a conversation with a colleague who had recently returned from her assignment in Brazil. Mary recounted some of the cross-cultural challenges and surprises she had encountered---and how she had been totally jazzed about what it had been like to work through them, how much she enjoyed mixing with locals outside of work and traveling, and her hope that she would get a new “foreign” assignment very soon.

David had anticipated that his brief preparations would have made the experience easier for him, but things were not as simple as he thought. He was also not a big fan of the local food. During the past two months, he had tried many Western restaurants in the city and had found a Western club where expatriates could get away from the local reality, a little piece of home away from home. He had begun to wonder if he was suited for global leadership assignments and, if not, why not? He felt less and less interested in the local culture and ways of doing things; and frustrated that he couldn’t get things done with his Chinese team. He was wondering what kind of person really thrives on this cross cultural complexity? Is it a function of personality, life experience, what you know---or what? And if he doesn’t have “it,” can he get it? How?