EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN LEADER DEVELOPMENT: Models, Tools, Best Practices, and Advice for On-the-Job Development

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Strategic Corporate Assignments to Develop Emerging Market Leaders

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Many emerging markets are growing rapidly, and organizations with operations in these markets are finding they do not have the talent needed in-country to meet the rising demand for managers. As we at Microsoft looked at this challenge, we wanted to ensure that high potential talent from key emerging markets had the opportunity to engage in a powerful learning experience while also applying their expertise to the complex issues of a large, global organization—issues typically worked on at the corporate headquarters. The goal of the resulting initiative—the Sales, Marketing, and Services Horizon Immersion Program (SHIP)—is to accelerate the development of leadership talent for our fastest-growing markets by providing on-the-job experiences that immerse participants in corporate business practices. A secondary goal is to have participants bring back new perspectives, approaches, and ways of doing business, and to share them with the subsidiary teams.

The Approach

At an early stage, those involved in designing the initiative decided that these learning experiences needed to be full immersions in temporary assignments with actual work
accountabilities—real work on real projects, not a passive job shadowing or a tourist-like experience. We started with a six-month window to ensure that the experience was long enough to be immersive but also short enough that the subsidiary could figure out how to get by without one of its high potential leaders. As mentioned at the end of this piece in the Lessons Learned section, we have since shortened this window to three months, a decision based on our first few experiments in which we saw that three months could still drive learning and six months was a bigger hit to the subsidiary and to the individuals than we wanted to cause.

Each assignment includes two elements. One is a project that allows participants to use their extensive knowledge of how the field organization works by helping their colleagues at corporate prepare a business initiative to be rolled out globally to the field. The other element is related more directly to each individual’s development needs. Let’s look at the process of nomination and highlight some of the tools that have been helpful in matching development needs to the assignment in the business.

**Nomination and Preparation**

To be eligible to participate, individuals must be nominated by the subsidiary country manager and confirmed by the subsidiary leadership team. Nominees must be considered top high potential talent for the subsidiary and must have been in their current roles for eighteen months or more. They are typically managers, but can also be senior-level individual contributors. All are serious contenders in succession planning conversations.

We collaborated with our network of HR Business Partners (HRBPs) in the field and together we identified four process steps, including:

*Step 1: Select nominees.* HRBPs help identify talent for movement. This is typically done at the beginning of the fiscal year, soon after the performance review is complete. Our guidance to HRBPs is that these assignments are best suited for those leaders who have a low level of international experience, have identified leadership gaps, or need to build a network at corporate. They then also complete a profile of the nominated participant that includes personal data, such as length of time at the company, previous history, their roles in succession plans, their career plans and ideal next moves, and their strengths, areas of development, and specific experience to be gathered from the assignment.

*Step 2: Select assignment opportunities.* We then share each participant’s information with the HRBPs in a targeted host organization and ask them to craft an immersion opportunity profile tailored to the individual (see Exhibit 13.1).

On the opportunity profile we require a brief description of the assignment, who the sponsor and day-to-day manager will be, articulation of key business outcomes, ideal timing and duration, experience to be gained, and competencies to be developed. Many groups within Microsoft feel that the organization’s planning window presents great learning opportunities, which often means all participants are at corporate in a similar timeframe. A critical element of success in this step is that we identify real business projects.
Step 3: Finalize assignment details. In this step we facilitate a call between the host manager and the participant to discuss and agree on the assignment. This mutual contracting to understand the scope of the work and set expectations is important to ensuring a strong start. It is also when both parties agree on the best timing for the assignment to start and for the participant to be absent from his or her normal role.

Step 4: Logistics kickoff. Once we are clear on assignment details we kick off the visa and relocation discussions and outline the benefits that the participant will receive while on assignment. At this stage we also may bring in our compensation and benefits team to support the transition. To relieve the participants of as much administrative burden as possible, we assign a program coordinator to expedite the process and liaise with legal, tax, travel, housing, and benefits.

During the Assignment

While on assignment, participants are encouraged to focus on three support elements to ensure a positive learning experience. These include:

Exhibit 13.1. Example of an Immersion Opportunity Profile

Nominated Individual: John Doe

Role/Project Description
Leverage field experience to amplify XYZ team results. Projects include:

- Help drive best practices
- Build consumer-marketing scenarios
- Develop messaging for global sales conference

Host Manager: Alice Smith

Timing and Optimum Duration
Mid-February through July (pending manager approval)

Business Outcomes
- Improve marketing return on investment and effectiveness by optimizing marketing approaches for key consumer segments
- Actionable content to enable field experience to be gained

Experience to Be Gained
Exposure to corporate planning, foundational marketing skills and experiences, and experience with operations at the headquarters level

Leadership Competencies to Be Developed
Business and strategy leadership, executive maturity, integrated marketing excellence, impact and influence, and cross-organization collaboration
1. **On-Boarding.** At the start of the assignment a peer mentor is identified and key stakeholders are introduced. If needed we also offer cross-cultural training and local orientation services. At this stage it is also useful to identify local training that may be scheduled while the participants are on assignment, as it can be a very enriching experience to attend a workshop with other peers from across the corporate headquarters.

2. **On-Assignment Coaching.** In addition to regular one-on-one meetings with the host manager, we arrange for an external professional coach to conduct a monthly check-in. Each check-in serves a particular purpose:

   - **Setting the Stage:** The purpose of this session is for the coach and participant to get to know each other and identify the key learning intentions for each of the assignment objectives. Typical follow-up will be an e-mail with relevant resources for the participant to explore.

   - **Midpoint Check-in:** During this second session the coach reviews how things are going and probes to determine whether there are areas that require additional support. The coach also encourages the participant to begin reflecting on what he or she has learned. This is important, as many will focus on getting the work done and less time on extrapolating the learning.

   - **Final Session:** This entails a full discussion of the impact of the alignment, lessons learned, and how the participant can take them forward into their current and future roles when they return to their home teams.

3. **Re-Entry.** Typically, participants will return to their previous roles in the subsidiary, but occasionally there may have been organizational changes afoot while they were away on assignment. In these special circumstances we will take a proactive role in engaging with the home country human resource director and manager to ensure re-entry is smooth. Regardless of the role a participant goes back to, we encourage a broad presentation of their lessons learned to the subsidiary leadership team and peers.

There are multiple layers of benefit of this approach for each participant as summarized in Exhibit 13.2.

### Impact

We measure the impact of the program directly after the experience and then track promotion velocity and career moves for all participants. The power of the learning experience is often immense and leaves participants with a much stronger appreciation of what it takes to operate in the complex setting of a corporate headquarters, for example, the scale at which one needs to think, the broader perspective that has to be taken, and the capability
needed to “connect the dots.” One participant was able to build consumer marketing scenarios, strategies, and activities for consumer segments and another was asked to operationalize a new services-sales strategy and prepare for global rollout. Regardless of the different experiences the participants went through, they are in unanimous agreement that the program will 100 percent support their future career advancement.

Host managers also find the experience rewarding and are willing to take on future participants, as they also benefit from a new team member with a different perspective. Effective assignments provide high potential talent with opportunities to step outside of their comfort zones and challenge themselves while implementing solutions to real problems. These stretch assignments accelerate their development, especially when they are exposed to different functions within the company or a different business group entirely.

Key business outcomes include personnel in emerging markets being able to build a strong network with their corporate-based peers, in addition to increased global fluency and a deeper understanding of the field at corporate. There is also a stronger leadership pipeline, with many participants taking key roles within twelve months of their return.

**Lessons Learned**

Following are a number of decision points and tips that may be helpful for practitioners, based on our experience:

*Logistics can make or break the program.* Make sure you have tapped into company resources that can support your needs for tax treaty advice, visa applications, relocation, and
benefits. For example, we learned that the tax treaties between nations can affect how long someone is allowed to be on a work assignment. We also were able to gauge through the advice of immigration lawyers how long to allow for visa processing in each of the target countries, which can vary considerably.

Length of assignment is a key decision point. Work out what is best for your company culture; over the past few years we have gone from six- to three-month assignments, as we have found that the longer participants are away from their home country, the harder the re-entry.

Invest in an on-site coach to help maximize the participant learning. Quite often the participants are absorbing so much new information as they fulfill their deliverables that they need support to create some time to facilitate their reflection and maximize their learning. We create this time through both an individual coach and also through peer roundtable sessions, so participants can learn from each other.

Centrally funding the program, with no cost to the host organization, facilitates obtaining immersion opportunities for the participants. This funding covered travel, including one home trip during assignment, car rental, lodging, per diem meals, gym membership, driving and language lessons (if needed), as well as tax and visa assistance. The home country maintains payroll for the participant.

Where possible, maximize the participants’ experience by helping them gain visibility to senior leaders in different settings. We manage this through tying the timing of the temporary assignments to key company events or processes.

We require that participants agree to return to their home subsidiary, whether it’s to their original role or to a new role, at the end of the assignment. We stipulate this to allay the concerns of home-country managers who worry they may lose their employees to the corporate offices.

Use the coach to preempt any issues related to reintegration. It is the coach who may hear about pending changes in the home organization, which becomes an indicator for additional follow-up. It is also a great time for the subsidiary leader to schedule a one-on-one.

The position the participant is leaving behind also opens up a developmental opportunity for someone else on the team. Thus, managers are encouraged to think about how they can use this temporary absence to allow someone else to try a stretch assignment. Being able to leave your current role also says a lot about a participant; for example, one sales manager was able to demonstrate his ability to delegate by leaving his team to manage in the last quarter of the year.

Encourage peer learning. Because many participants are at corporate in a similar timeframe, we have been able to set up peer-learning sessions, which have presented a rich environment for reflection and learning.

The HRBPs are an invaluable resource. When brokering talent with assignment opportunities, they are the ones who are able to identify the target organization and the right host manager.