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STIRring Things Up

By Kyle Nobbe

I recently ended a chapter of my life by earning my FSA. With the hopes of starting the next chapter with a bit more excitement, I decided to look for opportunities abroad. In the summer of 2014, I applied for a three-month overseas position offered by my current employer. I was approved, and in the beginning of December my assignment was underway.

The position was generated via the “Short Term International Rotation” (STIR) program. The purpose of STIR is to give employees a unique experience to live and work in a foreign environment. The result is a win-win: Participants experience professional and personal development, and my company deepens its connection and exposure between offices with regard to people and processes.

I currently work in the U.S. mortality markets area of a global life reinsurance company. My STIR assignment took place in Sydney for two months and then one month in Hong Kong. In both locations I had a pricing role in a department that supports the Asian markets. I was eager for this position for too many reasons to list, but in the big picture it boils down to:

1. I was looking for a little adventure (and a touch of pushing me out of my comfort zone).
2. I wanted to learn about products in one of the largest insurance markets in the world.
3. I *needed* to develop a global perspective.

Point 3 is valuable beyond measure, especially for someone like me who has never lived outside the state of Missouri. Obtaining a global perspective is a necessity because I believe it is a characteristic that all leaders should possess.

MY GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE AND MONKEYS

My experience hiking near the Kowloon Reservoir, commonly known as Monkey Hill, in Hong Kong is a great metaphor for my global experience:

- Some things we correctly expect on our own.
- Some things we are told of in advance.
- And then there is everything else of which we have no idea or control over.

Before this hiking experience, I expected to see monkeys since thousands call this reservoir home. I was warned by a colleague not to bring any grocery bags as the wild monkeys might associate that with food and potentially get aggressive; in the worst case, scratch me or my wife with their un-manicured nails. However, there will always be surprises, especially

when traveling in a different part of the world.

On a Saturday afternoon my wife and I began our hike, and it probably took one hour just to find a monkey asleep in a tree. We were let down a bit, but then as our hike was coming to an end we came across five monkeys plus some babies. We were very excited! My wife pulled out her phone to take a short video. As it turns out, wild monkeys do not like to be stared at (thanks for the warning), which I found out the hard way.

When we stopped walking to start filming, I made eye contact with the alpha-male for too long. To establish its dominance, the monkey swung out of the tree and jumped toward us—hissing, showing us its teeth, and flailing its arms. My wife screamed and ran behind me while I tried to appear

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calm, but my heart was beating through my chest. The monkey stopped its charge no more than 10 feet from us. I learned my lesson by experience.

Of course most Australians and Chinese do not hiss and flail their arms when they are offended or feel the need to express their dominance. My point is that you cannot get a true global perspective by reading articles, hearing stories, or watching a film. Without actually being a part of the environment, you will struggle to get a true understanding of how a culture interacts and functions.

LEADERS WITH A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

When working for a global company, it is very important that different offices and markets synergize and synchronize with each other. Leaders of a global company must understand how to make this happen, which requires a global perspective.

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Identifying and acknowledging the similarities and differences between cultures can help a company create its global brand and work environment. The effect of doing so produces a company culture that allows associates from around the world to feel like they are all on the same team working toward the same goal. Leaders who know how to avoid the hissing monkeys will create a successful, efficient operation with all teams conquering the same hike.

Without the leadership to make this possible, employees will not adequately understand the entire value each department possesses. They may feel disconnected from headquarters

and operations, which can lead to isolation or a lack of appreciation.

This same concept can apply to leaders with a smaller scale such as a local office or a small department because we live in such a globalized world with cultural diversity. Although my company is comprised of many different cultures, the Hong Kong and Sydney offices were both very similar to our U.S. headquarters environment with regard to being client-focused. This has been instilled in every office throughout my company due to effective leadership at every level.

In summary, I improved my ability to lead in the future by combining my cultural knowledge of the locations I worked in with the technical aspects of my day-to-day job. I feel confident about stretching my comfort and my experience to a new level. My company has created a great program for associates like me to professionally and personally grow to their potential, so I encourage anyone with similar opportunities to do the same ... and don't stare at the monkeys. ■



Kyle Nobbe, FSA, MAAA, is assistant actuary at Reinsurance Group of America, Inc. He can be reached at knobbe@rgare.com.