

Successfully

Leading and Managing an American Workforce

From the Wall Street Journal

A GM Unit in China's Hands
By Dennis K. Berman
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You don't need to understand exchange rates and trade wars to grasp the economic change that has come to Saginaw, Michigan. Remarkably, the largest private employer there will soon be the city government of Beijing.

In the weeks ahead, a 104-year-old unit of General Motors will be sold to new owners from China. The unit made steering equipment for decades under the name Saginaw Steering Gear. Now known as Nexteer, it employs 8,300 people around the world. Its new Beijing owners call themselves Pacific Century Motors.

It is one of the landmark deals of the era, the first time Chinese investors have bought a U.S. industrial operation of such scale and history: Twenty-two factories around the globe, six engineering centers, 14 customer-support centers. All of it will be run from Saginaw, where devotion to the company extended to a now-defunct hockey team. It called itself the Gears.

The deal will, of course, test China's nascent foreign investment and management prowess. But it is shaping up to be more of a test stateside, where attitudes against China continue to coarsen as unemployment stays stubbornly high and politicians complain about China taking U.S. jobs, if not U.S. pride.

People inside and outside the company seem gingerly accepting of Pacific Century, a venture of the city of Beijing's investment arm and a closely held Beijing auto parts company called Tempo Group.

"I'm sure there are a lot of people who are not happy they're Chinese-owned," says Scott Somers, who runs Mid-States Bolt & Screw just down the road from Nexteer, which is a customer. "But at this point it seems to be a positive thing. Lots of businesses are involved with that complex and depend on it for their livelihood."

The feeling is more begrudging for the workers inside the company. One, who called the Chinese "commies," complained to a union official that the U.S. flag and a P.O.W.-M.I.A. memorial flag were taken down when Chinese officials visited recently. A company spokesman said he had no knowledge of any flags being taken down.

And while they like the stability of new owners, "everyone is concerned about long-term viability," said one United Auto Workers official who asked not to be named.

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Keys to Successfully Lead and Manage an American Workforce

Michelle Randall brings a unique perspective to global leadership. As the President of Enriching Leadership International, she is a trusted ally of top-level executives in the high tech, telecommunications, construction, manufacturing and service sectors around the globe. She was a high tech executive in Silicon Valley and led international teams in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Her upcoming book is *Culturally Agile Leadership: Build Genuine Relationships by Placing Value on Culture and Communication*.



Why an American* Workforce?

Emerging markets are producing heavyweight global organizations. Growth will naturally lead to major acquisitions in mature markets, such as the U.S. The management style that has worked to create a great company at home will not necessarily translate to the successful leadership of an American workforce. This position paper is a guide bridging both styles to achieve the results that were the goal of the acquisition in the first place while honoring the management style of the global entity making the acquisition.

What is an American Workforce?

In a word, diverse. An American workforce will not consist entirely of Americans. The U.S. was founded in immigration and furthered by internal migration. The country has continued to attract the most entrepreneurial talent with the wherewithal to leave their roots behind in the desire for new horizons. An American workforce is global, especially in the technology sector, when considering nationality and heritage; what they share are American values.

The Strengths of an American Workforce

Entrepreneurial

Entrepreneurialism in the workplace is distinguished by a sense of job ownership by the individual. When employees take ownership of their job, they are taking responsibility for themselves and the team they are creating. They create their own momentum and apply creativity to the work they are doing.

This is a strength that the top players will automatically bring to the table and can be elicited as the rest of the team is developed. Keeping and growing this spirit can be challenging for American leaders who innately understand their workforce. Many foreign companies have killed this entrepreneurial spirit when applying their management style to an American workforce. The result is that the top players leave for an organization that will foster their entrepreneurialism.

At its heart, innovation requires a comfort with risk, and Americans have the most risk-loving culture of any mature market. Every individual is unique. However, as a whole, Americans will feel comfortable taking the

risks required to achieve breakthrough innovation on a consistent basis. This is especially the case if they receive support from their management. It is critical that this support is not only in words, but that it is supported in consistent managerial actions.

Productive

Statistically, U.S. workers are the most productive in the world. Worker protection and organization is less in the U.S. than in other mature economies. This is a direct result of the self-confidence inherent in the majority of American workers. The flip side of self-reliance is a deep mistrust and dislike of paternalism. As a result, in order to capitalize on American worker productivity, it's important to foster it with individual freedoms and not smother it with controls.

Opinionated

By virtue of their education and experience, an American workforce has plenty of ideas about the quality of organization: internal processes, structures and management, in addition to the quality of products and services the organization is providing.

The U.S. is a very feedback-oriented society. Marketers solicit opinions constantly. Managers do this as well in order to solicit "buy in," especially since Americans are more likely to share their opinions with their colleagues than with management if they get the sense that management isn't listening.

Seeking Meaning

To continue this idea, having the belief that management is listening to their opinions or investing in their improvement is a great reward to American workers. Americans are seeking meaning in every aspect of their lives. Despite the stereotypes placed on Americans, the meaning that is being sought goes beyond money and achievement. It's a sense of having a positive impact on the communities they are a part of. The leadership that can tap into this need and bring meaning to work can engender intense loyalty. Beware, credibility is paramount to leveraging meaning in the workplace. Americans have become a bit jaded as a result of overt, yet shallow, attempts at creating meaning in everything from the workplace to breakfast cereal. Talk must be backed up with action that is consistent with the words.

While there are many aspects to master in this pursuit, the following are a few strategies to make great headway with an American workforce. These may seem strange or even in strong conflict with the culture of the organization making the acquisition. In order to keep top performers however, it would be wise to engage a professional who is skilled at coaching and training managers. This mentor can greatly assist managers to exercise the traits required for successful leadership in the US while remaining true to the values of the parent organization.

Lead and Manage

Leadership implies vision, charisma and inspiring followership. Management is the art of getting people to achieve a particular result. Americans look for a combination of both from the people above them in an organizational hierarchy.

Great Management is Coaching

Top performers will rebel against micro management. Coaching provides direction, insight, and feedback while leaving ownership in the hands of the employees.

Tolerate Failure

The optimal amount of failure is not zero. Without failure, innovation is being smothered because employees and the organization are not testing their boundaries. The way to keep the entrepreneurial spirit thriving is to allow freedom to fail. Naturally, this is done by equipping employees with the resources they will need for success and having contingency plans in place.

Manage for Results

Results are what you want done. Process is how it gets done. Distinguishing carefully between these two is critical for empowering employees with a sense of job ownership. The more that the process for creating results is proscribed and controlled, employees will feel less personally responsible for the results.

Communicate

While it's important to educate employees on the impacts of any

acquisitions and changes, the key to successful communication with an American workforce is listening. When they believe they are being listened to, Americans are great followers. Americans are very adaptable and flexible. If they understand the direction of the organization and are treated with respect, they will most often commit fully, even when they may not agree entirely.

The goal is to lead in a way that capitalizes on the strengths of an American workforce while staying true to the foundations that made the acquiring organization successful. Doing this takes an awareness of the culture, beliefs and values inherent in the acquiring organization and its country of origin. This reveals basic assumptions that are natural and unspoken, but which may lead to conflict with American employees without adequate communication. This also grows self-awareness in managers that will allow them to make better educated choices in how they apply their own style to the leadership of an American workforce. ■



* For ease of reading, I will use the term American workforce to describe the U.S. American workforce. This is done with great respect to all the workforces throughout the Americas.

NOTES

Enriching Leadership International

Enriching Leadership International is a global consulting, training and executive coaching firm based in Silicon Valley. The company's founder, Michelle Randall, has been accelerating the trajectory of high-growth global companies for nearly a decade.

Leaders praise Michelle Randall:

"Michelle Randall is an exemplar of thought leadership in her field of cultural agility. She provides unique insights, intellectual capital, and growth techniques that aren't to be found elsewhere or in so coherent a fashion."

— Alan Weiss, author of Million Dollar Consulting

"Thanks very much, Michelle. Coaching has been excellent and valuable, and will last much longer than the months we have been working together. You have been an inspiration."

— Mark Forward, Executive Director, Young Presidents' Organization

"With a fast and furious job and life and a new role as House Majority Leader, there were plenty of bigger and day-to-day issues I struggled with which made sense for coaching. Through coaching, I feel less stressed out, more in control, and less responsible to keep up with everything. It has also made me generally more conscious of what I decide to do with my time, the requests that are made of me and the quality of life I want."

— Hannah Pingree, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Maine

"Michelle has a honed sixth sense for business. She can walk into a situation and quickly be making game-changing insights and recommendations."

— Chad White, CEO, JKM Manufacturing

"Having an outside independent party who's not politically charged to help and provide great ideas is really great. Michelle always brought me around to another way of looking at things. I'm now getting a lot more street credibility in the field and developing the relationships I need to succeed."

— Keith Gauss, CFO of OldCastle APG

For more information about how we can support your organization or to engage Michelle as a speaker at your next event contact us.

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