

Fred Bailey: An Innocent Abroad

Fred gazed out the window of his 24th floor office at the tranquil beauty of the Imperial Palace amidst the hustle and bustle of downtown Tokyo. Only six months ago, Fred had arrived with his wife and two children for this three-year assignment as the director of Kline & Associates' Tokyo office. Kline & Associates is a large, multinational consulting firm with offices in 19 countries worldwide. Fred was now trying to decide if he should simply pack up and tell the home office that he was coming home, or whether he should somehow try to convince his wife and himself that they should stay and finish the assignment. Given how excited Fred thought they all were about the assignment to begin with, it was a mystery to Fred as to how things had gotten to this point. As he watched the swans glide across the water in the moat that surrounds the Imperial Palace, Fred reflected on the past seven months.

Seven months ago, the managing partner of the main office in Boston, Dave Steiner, asked Fred to lunch to discuss business. To Fred's surprise, the business was not the major project that he and his team had just finished but was instead a very big promotion and career move. Fred was offered the position of managing director of the firm's relatively new Tokyo office which had a staff of 40, including seven Americans. Most of the Americans in the Tokyo office were either associate consultants or research analysts. Fred would be in charge of the whole office and would report to a senior partner who was in charge of the Asian region. It was implied to Fred that if this assignment went as well as his past ones, it would be the last step before becoming a partner in the firm.

When Fred told Jenny, his wife, about the unbelievable opportunity, he was shocked at her less-than-enthusiastic response. She thought that it would be difficult for the children live and go to school in a foreign country for three years, especially when Christine, the oldest, would be starting middle school next year. Besides, now that the kids were in school, Jenny was thinking about going back to work—at least part time. Jenny had a degree in fashion merchandising from a well-known private university and had worked as an assistant buyer for a large women's clothing store before having the two girls.

Fred explained that the career opportunity was just too good to pass up and that the company's overseas package would make living overseas terrific. The company would pay all the expenses to move whatever the Baileys wanted to take with them. The company had a very nice house in an expensive district of Tokyo that would be provided to them rent-free. Additionally, the company would rent their house in Boston during their absence. Also, the firm would provide a car and driver, education expenses for the children to attend private schools, and a cost-of-living adjustment and overseas compensation that would nearly triple Fred's gross annual salary. After two days of consideration and discussion, Fred told Dave Steiner he would accept the assignment.

The previous Tokyo office managing director was a partner in the firm but had only been in the new Tokyo office for less than a year when he was transferred to head up a long-established office in England. Because the transfer to England was taking place right away, Fred and his family had about three weeks to prepare for the move. Between getting things at the office transferred to Bob Newcome, who was being promoted to Fred's position, and the logistical hassles of getting furniture and the like ready to be moved, neither Fred nor his family had much time to really find out much about Japan, other than what was in the encyclopedia.

When the Baileys arrived, they were greeted at the airport by one of the young Japanese associate consultants and the senior American expatriate. Fred and his family were tired from the long trip, and the two-hour ride back to Tokyo was a quiet one. After a few days of settling in, Fred spent his first day at the office.

Fred's first order of business was to have a general meeting with all the employees of associate consultant rank and higher. Although Fred didn't really notice it at the time, all the Japanese staff sat together and all the Americans sat together. After Fred introduced himself and his general idea about the potential and future direction of the Tokyo office, he called on a few individuals to get their ideas about how their responsibilities would likely fit into his overall plan. From the Americans, Fred got a mixture of opinions with specific reasons about why certain things might or might not fit well. From the Japanese, he got very vague answers. When Fred pushed to get more specific information, he was surprised to find that a couple of the Japanese simply made a sucking sound as they breathed and said that it was "difficult to say." Fred sensed the meeting was not fulfilling his objectives, so he thanked everyone for coming and said he looked forward to their all working together to make the Tokyo office the fastest growing office in the company.

After they had been in Japan about a month, Fred's wife complained to him about the difficulty she had getting certain everyday products like maple syrup, peanut butter, and quality beef. She said that when she could get it at one of the specialty stores it cost three to four times what it would cost in the United States. She also complained that the washer and dryer were much too small and she had to spend extra money by sending things out to be dry cleaned. On top of all that, unless she went to the American Club in downtown Tokyo, she never had anyone to talk to. After all, Fred was gone 10 to 16 hours a day. Unfortunately, at the time, Fred was preoccupied, thinking about a big upcoming meeting between his firm and a significant prospective client—a top 100 Japanese multinational company.

The next day, Fred, along with the lead American consultant for the potential contract, Ralph Webster, and one of the Japanese associate consultants, Kenichi Kurokawa, who spoke perfect English, met with a team from the Japanese firm. The Japanese team consisted of four members—the VP of administration, the director of international personnel, and two staff specialists. After shaking hands and a few awkward bows, Fred said that he knew the Japanese gentlemen were busy and he didn't want to waste their time so he would get right to the point. Fred then had the other American lay out their firm's proposal for the project and what the project would cost. After the presentation, Fred asked the Japanese what their reaction to the proposal was. The Japanese did not respond immediately and so Fred launched into his summary version of the proposal, thinking that the translation might have been insufficient. But, again, the Japanese had only the vaguest of responses to his direct questions.

The recollection of the frustration of that meeting was enough to shake Fred back to reality. The reality was that, in the five months since the first meeting, little progress had been made and the contract between the firms had yet to be signed. "I can never seem to get a direct response from a Japanese," he thought to himself. This feeling of frustration led him to remember a related incident that happened about a month after this first meeting with the client.

Fred reasoned that not much progress was being made with the client because Fred and his group just didn't know enough about the client to package the proposal in a way that was appealing to the client. Consequently, he called in the senior American associated with the proposal, Ralph Webster, and asked him to develop a report on the client so the proposal

could be reevaluated and changed where necessary. Jointly, they decided that one of the more promising Japanese research associates, Tashiro Watanabe, would be the best person to take the lead on this report. To impress upon Tashiro the importance of this task and the great potential they saw in him, they decided to have the young Japanese associate meet with both Fred and Ralph. In the meeting, Fred and Ralph laid out the nature and importance of the task. At that point, Fred leaned forward in his chair and said, "You can see that this is an important assignment and that we are placing a lot of confidence in you by giving you this assignment. We need the report this time next week so that we can revise and re-present our proposal. Can you do it?" After a somewhat pregnant pause, the Japanese responded hesitantly, "I'm not sure what to say." At that point, Fred smiled, got up from his chair, and walked over to the young Japanese associate, extended his hand, and said, "Hey, there's nothing to say. We're just giving you the opportunity you deserve."

The day before the report was due, Fred asked Ralph how the report was coming. Ralph said that since he had heard nothing from Tashiro, he assumed that everything was under control, but that he would double-check. Ralph later ran into one of the American research associates, John Maynard. Ralph knew that John was hired for the Tokyo office because of his language ability in Japanese and that, unlike any of the other Americans, John often went out after work with some of the Japanese research associates including Tashiro. So, Ralph asked John if he knew how Tashiro was coming on the report. John then recounted that, last night at the office, Tashiro had asked if Americans sometimes fired employees for being late with reports. John had sensed that this was more than a hypothetical question and asked Tashiro why he wanted to know. Tashiro did not respond immediately and, since it was 8:30 in the evening, John suggested they go out for a drink. At first Tashiro resisted, but then John assured him that they would grab a drink at a nearby bar and come right back. At the bar, John got Tashiro to open up.

Tashiro explained the nature of the report that he had been requested to produce. Tashiro continued to explain that even though he had worked long into the night every night to complete the report, it was just impossible; he had doubted from the beginning whether he could complete the report in a week.

At this point, Ralph asked John, "Why the hell didn't he say something in the first place?" Ralph didn't wait to hear whether John had an answer to his question or not. He headed straight to Tashiro's desk.

The incident just got worse from that point. Ralph chewed Tashiro out and then went to Fred explaining that the report would not be ready and that Tashiro didn't think it could have been from the start. "Then why didn't he say something?" Fred asked. No one had any answers and the whole thing just left everyone more suspect and uncomfortable with each other.

There were other incidents, big and small, that had made the last two months especially frustrating, but Fred was too tired to remember them all. To Fred, it seemed that working with Japanese both inside and outside the firm was like working with people from another planet. Fred felt he just couldn't communicate with them, and he could never figure out what they were thinking. It drove him crazy.

Then, on top of all this, Jenny laid a bombshell on him yesterday. She wanted to go home, and yesterday was not soon enough. Even though the kids seemed to be doing okay, Jenny was tired of Japan—tired of being stared at, of not understanding anybody or being understood, of not being able to find what she wanted at the store, of not being able to drive

and read the road signs, of not having anything to watch on TV, of not being involved in anything. She wanted to go home and could not think of any reason why they shouldn't. After all, she reasoned, they owed nothing to the company because the company had led them to believe this was just another assignment, like the two years they spent in San Francisco, and it was anything but that!

Fred looked out the window once more, wishing that somehow everything could be fixed, or turned back, or something. Down below, the traffic was backed up. Though the traffic lights changed, the cars and trucks didn't seem to be moving. Fortunately, in the ground below, one of the world's most advanced, efficient, and clean subway systems moved hundreds of thousands of people about the city and to their homes.

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