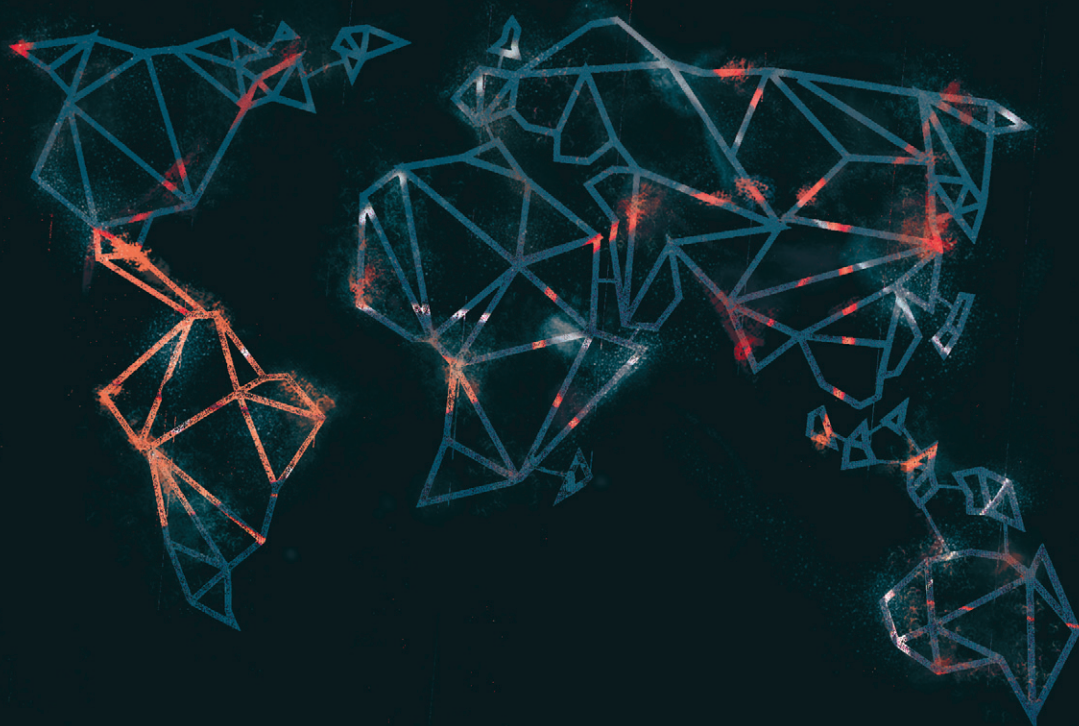# EXPATRIATE LEADERS OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Creating Success in an Unforgiving Environment

PATRICIA JEAN MCLAUGHLIN

Expatriate Leaders of International Development Projects

This page intentionally left blank

Expatriate Leaders of International Development Projects: Creating Success in an Unforgiving Environment

BY

PATRICIA JEAN MCLAUGHLIN

Independent Consultant, USA

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.

ISOQAR REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Robert, with love

This page intentionally left blank

Table of Contents

This page intentionally left blank

List of Figures and Tables

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction: Finding My Way into Expatriate Leadership and the Study of Expatriate Leaders of International Development Projects

Perhaps this study of expatriate leaders of international development projects has been my destiny. An avid reader as a child, exploring places beyond my small hometown in the South, I knew a day would come when I would stretch my boundaries, but was uncertain how far, until my sixth-grade year. Exposed for the first-time to world history and geography I was intrigued, and by my first encounter with Robert Frost's poem, *A Road Not Taken*, I was inspired. Quite simply, I left Mrs. Freeman's sixth grade classroom determined I would live and work in foreign countries one day. When it would happen, I had no idea. Perhaps even more critically, I had no idea how to prepare for it. But deep down I knew, it would happen.

What follows in this chapter is the story of my expatriate leadership journey and how that led to the study upon which this book is based. It begins with a review of life experiences through which I developed skills pivotal to helping me grow into the life and work challenges of expatriate leadership and how my intrigue with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) evolved. The story culminates with a review of expatriate leadership experiences of mine with USAID projects that evolved into my desire to understand how expatriate leaders managing USAID projects do what they due to create project success.

Growing into Expatriate Leadership

While I was growing up, we traveled very little as a family, primarily because of my father's work, which kept him chained to our small town. As such, that only happened twice, because my mother wanted to return to Philadelphia, PA, where she had been born, to visit extended family members and friends from her childhood. Those two trips to PA opened my eyes to how different other places,

even in the United States, could be. Decades later, as I recall those two trips, it was a cultural awareness experience that sticks with me, more than even the sights we saw. In the South where I grew up it was common, no matter how large or small a retail store was, when handing money to pay for a purchase that the sales clerk, as they took the money in hand, would say "Thank you! Y'all come back!" But in the North, every time I approached a counter in a store to pay for an item and handed the sales clerk my money, the clerk took my money and handed my change back to me without saying a word, which was odd to me, and it felt rude. Although young at the time I realized then that if things could be so different within the United States, I had to learn to adapt to unknown cultures and mores if I was going to successfully adapt to living and working in foreign countries.

On another front, growing up in a small town in the South in the waning days of segregated, and small, neighborhood schools meant I did not have the experience of interacting with people of color nor with people from the town's professional class, because many, if not most, of my classmates in elementary school came from working class families like mine. It was not until high school that I had some semblance of experience interacting with people different than me, either by color or by class, when students from the five neighborhood elementary schools in my hometown converged to form one high school class, which was joined, for the first time in my hometown, by students of color who asked to enroll in what had been a "whites only" high school. But, as compulsory integration was still not required, my high school graduating class of 365 students had no Hispanic students and only five Black students, with most, if not all, of the Black students being dependents of Air Force officers stationed nearby at Perrin Air Force Base. I became acquainted with one of them while sharing hall monitoring duty with her. When I learned she had arrived in my hometown from Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture of Japan, I was envious. She had already been to faraway foreign places, as a result of growing up following her father's military career around the world, that I could still only dream about.

Experience navigating within an unknown culture came quickly after my college graduation. A residential school for the deaf in Oklahoma needed a teacher and, even though my degree was in a different field of education, I accepted the offer because I needed a job. With the rudimentary hearing aids of the day my students, for all intents and purposes, lived in a world of silence, immersed in the American Deaf Culture, communicating with each other through American Sign Language. Like a foreigner working in a foreign land I had to learn quickly how to communicate with my students. Said simply, teaching at the school for the deaf was as foreign to me as Okinawa, but I adapted, learning sign language sufficiently that three years later I sponsored a sign language choir, and along the way my confidence grew in my abilities to adapt to unknown languages and cultural environments.

A few years later, while in the final months of completing my master's degree in adult/continuing education, to prepare to work in training and development in the business sector, I accepted a job at a nonprofit organization that worked with low-income, disadvantaged women to help them prepare for, and attain work, through non-traditional work opportunities that would provide them steady

income to support their families, in place of the public assistance most of them received. Other than me, the small leadership team, as with almost all of our clientele, were women of color. My colleagues on the leadership team were, like me, professional women with degrees, commuting from more prosperous areas of Dallas to the program's office, which was situated nearby to the public housing communities where our clientele lived. I took this job because it gave me an opportunity to merge two of my interests. First, it served as a work practicum for my master's degree in training and development, and second, it aligned with my graduate research on the work, home, and life pressures experienced by middle-aged women. The women that participated in the program were there by choice, with no remuneration from the women's program or from any government assistance program, which meant they were motivated. The first question I asked each woman the first day they attended was, "What is your reason for being here?" and invariably, the answer was along the lines of, "I want a better life for my children." This I observed once overseas is a near-universal aspiration, which is, in effect, what expatriate leaders of international development projects aspire to help foreign beneficiaries make possible for their clientele. Indeed, living and working as a foreigner in a foreign land, I realized how valuable this work practicum with the women's program had been in helping me be at ease living and working as a minority within a workplace, as that is generally the case with expatriate leaders of USAID projects. Having grown up within a "whites only" environment, my work with the women's program was the first time in my life to experience what it was like to not just be *in* the minority, but to *be* the minority, as everyone I interfaced with at the women's program, except one participant, was a woman of color. However, although this job gave me experience *being* the minority in the workplace, I remained cognizant that as training manager I had the privilege of position power, so my experience *being* the minority was not equivalent to the experiences our clients frequently experienced in the workplace. Nonetheless, it sensitized me to the experience of *being* the minority, which helped me adjust to expatriate leadership. I enjoyed the work and I learned from that experience that listening with my heart, instead of looking at the color of someone's skin, was the key to forging productive, caring relationships with anyone, anywhere.

With my master's degree in hand, I left the women's program to accept a position to serve on the marketing team of a new electronic publishing division with one the oldest textbook publishers in the United States in the early 1980s, and in time, assuming responsibility for a region that encompassed the Midwestern, Southwestern and Western regions of the United States. My primary mission was to promote our products and train clients in how to use them by interfacing with clients, be they corporate leaders of reseller organizations we contracted with to sell our products or school leaders and teachers who were the end users of our products. However, because educational electronic products were, essentially, in their infancy, there were glitches along the way, many times through user error, but sometimes because of a bug in the software that had remained undetected during quality assurance testing. As such, I spent considerable time interfacing with unhappy clients to assuage their frustrations, and sometimes, their anger and I grew from those experiences.

For example, three months into a new school year I received a frantic call from one of the publisher's sales representatives who feared they were on the verge of losing one their most valuable customers. The school district had purchased six management systems for their twelve elementary schools, with the intent that each system would support two elementary schools. The problems were pervasive. There was not one management system, nor one school, that had not experienced one or more problems. Someone from the publisher's corporate office had conducted their user training and told the school leaders to contact them if they had any problems, which the school leaders had done repeatedly, but their pleas for help had been unwittingly ignored because they were not passed on to the right person, me, because of a recent reorganization. Gathered in an auditorium at the school district's central headquarters, the district leaders and the 12 elementary school principals were, politely, furious. To learn the big picture issues I listened to their collective complaints, and then working with each elementary school and their leaders to sort through their individual problems, along with engaging with other parties such as software designers, I resolved their problems and helped the sales representative retain a valuable customer. Managing issues such as this, that were a blend of technical problems, customer relations and public relations, strengthened my confidence in my ability to simultaneously resolve a multiplicity of problems with a multiplicity of clients to ensure retention of valued customers. As I would eventually learn once working for international development projects, that is an important skill for expatriate leaders of international development projects to have as their office is at the crossroads of a multiplicity of organizations and, simultaneously, they are dealing with the technical aspects of a project while ensuring productive customer relations are maintained with recipient organizations and that productive public relations are maintained through the project's social marketing efforts.

During the six years I was with the publisher I spent so much time on airplanes I knew the menu rotation and, as such, what to expect for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I rarely spent more than a day or two in the same city or state and seldom returned to a city and if I did, I typically returned to work there with a different client than I had worked with previously. Thus, in practical terms, every work-week during the six years I worked for the publisher was different in scope, location and client, from the work-week that came before it and the work-week that would come after it. To survive and thrive and achieve success in this work environment required the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and, as I came to realize, learning to adapt to ever-changing circumstances helped me develop a tolerance for ambiguity, which I would eventually learn is an invaluable attribute for expatriate leaders of USAID projects.

The six years I worked for the publisher marked my turn toward leadership. While I was drawn to opportunities to lead and had held a couple of competency-based leadership positions, such as with the women's program, I had never had anyone encourage me to be a leader. That changed during my first three years with the publisher, with me receiving continued encouragement from the regional manager I worked for during those three years. Frequently, he would tell me "You could be a leader! You have the talent to be a regional manager!" and he

made it his mission to help me prepare to be one, giving me short-term assignments that allowed me to gain experience doing tasks he normally did, such as negotiating contracts with resellers, which boosted my confidence, as did receiving encouragement from someone as well-regarded as he was within the educational publishing industry. Being mindful of challenges women experienced in moving upward, in part because his wife encountered those challenges as a manager in a male-dominated technology firm, he helped me understand the importance of impression management. For example, beyond positioning me to stand in for him in negotiating contracts from time-to-time, he insisted I pick up the tab for expensive dinners when we were entertaining corporate leaders of our reseller organizations, so that they would view me as his equal. Beyond the literal benefit of his mentoring me for leadership was a lesson I carried forward with me into leadership, which has proved to be as valuable leading followers in overseas settings as in settings closer to home. From his example I learned the importance of simply caring about those you lead, seeing them as people, not just as employees there to get a job done.

During these early formative years of my career, through a significant life event, I discovered something about myself, that would benefit me as an expatriate leader; I had the wisdom to assess circumstances; the courage to make difficult decisions and the resilience to remain on course to see those decisions through to a successful conclusion, even when the efficacy of my decision was questioned by people of significance. Three years into my career after graduating from college I faced a life-altering decision; was I to have a newly developed surgical procedure whose long-term viability was, in effect, untested on someone my age or did I remain on course, knowing that my days of being able to live independently and continue my career were rapidly dwindling. The decision was made even more difficult because my father, whose approval I had yearned for since childhood yet never could earn, was adamantly against my decision to go forward with the procedure. I knew I would hear "I told you so" from him for the remainder of my life if the procedure failed to give me the long-term mobility I sought, but after carefully considering all the information I gathered from the medical community and assessing my goals for my life I stayed the course with my decision and that altered the trajectory of my life. Learning I had the courage to confront challenges with uncertain outcomes and the ability to make and follow through on difficult decisions boosted my self-confidence. This, coupled with the encouragement I received from the regional manager, proved to be important in my journey into expatriate leadership, because, as I would come to learn, uncertainty is the one thing that is certain about living and leading in developing countries. Quite simply, the courage I discovered within me helped me as an expatriate to confront the challenges that arise out of these uncertainties which enabled me to enjoy the expatriate lifestyle. And my ability to make and follow through on difficult decisions helped me as an expatriate leader to discern a productive pathway forward for organizations and the confidence to lead them along that pathway in the midst of these uncertainties.

Toward the end of my six years with the publisher after earning countless frequent flyer miles, I traveled to London and Paris for vacation, solo. With a

map in hand wandering the streets of London alone sightseeing was easy, being a native English speaker, but doing so in Paris was more challenging because I did not speak French, but I learned that with a pleasant disposition I could get the help I needed to find my way. I came home from those trips confident the dream of my childhood to live and work overseas could and would be realized. I knew I was capable of navigating the nuances of adapting to new cultures, working as a minority in a workplace, and that I was capable of tolerating the ambiguity the expatriate lifestyle requires. The question was no longer "whether" it would happen but "when" and surprisingly, the answer came not long after those two trips abroad.

In my late thirties, and newly married, life circumstances presented my husband and me the opportunity to ask ourselves, "How do we want to reinvent our lives?" My immediate response was, "I have always wanted to live and work in foreign countries!" and my husband's reply was, "And I have always wanted to travel to foreign countries!" Six months later we landed in Casablanca, Morocco where I became the K-12 computer/technology department head for Casablanca American School.

Eager to realize our dream, when my husband and I decided to pursue work abroad, we agreed we would both pursue work opportunities and whoever received a viable offer first the other one would follow. Our research quickly revealed my husband's expertise was not in high demand, whereas my career in the education sector in the United States, especially the experience and expertise with education technology that I had gained from my six years of work with the publisher, would offer us a more immediate range of options, primarily within private, international schools overseas, which it did. As such, I received the offer from Casablanca American School. Looking back, our agreed strategy to expedite our move overseas unwittingly set us on a trail-blazing life together as my career not only served as the lead career to take us overseas and then back to the United States it remained the lead career, with my husband's encouragement.

What opened doors for me with private international schools at that time was primarily the expertise I had with education technology, which included experience working with instructional applications that supported classroom instruction as well as school management applications that supported principals in various tasks, such as managing their budget, preparing report cards, and monitoring student attendance. This was because few educators in the late 1980s had experience with education technology, and of those that did, very few of them were interested in living and working overseas. Secondarily, my special education experience and expertise, coupled with my elementary education background added credence to my job applications with the international schools, because it revealed that I not only understood education technology, but I understood how to embed its use in school settings, instructionally as well as managerially, to the benefit of students as well as teachers and principals.

Originally, my role with the publisher had been conceptualized as a competency-based leadership role with my expertise under-girding marketing of electronic publishing products. However, during my last three years with the publisher, after a reorganization, my one-region competency-based leadership role became a

three-region work role that was in effect a leader/manager role, with me responsible for marketing support functions for all K-12 electronic publishing products. Instead of one regional manager with whom to work, I had three regional managers who, in effect, competed for my time and efforts leaving me to self-manage my work in all three regions. While I frequently gave presentations to support marketing efforts, I had also worked directly with schools in training their instructional and leadership staff in how to use our educational technology products, as well as how to integrate the use of the products in their work, whether they were a school principal who had purchased school management products or teachers who were users of our instructional products. Thus, it was not just my expertise with education technology and with designing and developing training and development programs, but also the experience I had managing the myriad of details involved in supporting a school's use of technology that opened doors for me with private international schools, as most of these schools were just beginning to launch technology programs. They needed someone who could either revise a fledgling school technology program as I did in Casablanca, Morocco from 1988 to 1990 or lead the development and launch of a new information technology (IT) program as I did for the three-campus elementary division at Frankfurt International School (FIS) from 1990 until June 1994.

As one of the oldest international schools in Europe, FIS was well established, and I felt privileged when I was hired to lead the development and launch of the elementary division's new IT program. The experience with FIS was a foundational one for me, since I learned how to assemble and lead an advisory team in crafting a vision, along with how to engender broad support to effect and sustain the vision. The board had recruited a new elementary division principal with a mandate to innovate, as they believed the division had grown stale after being under the same principal for more than 20 years and I was ready to support the new principal in delivering on his mandate. Three years later, as I was completing my last weeks with FIS the elementary division principal told me, "You should feel proud of what you have accomplished" and I did. I had had a vision and dared to dream it could become reality. I had put an advisory team together to work with me that helped me conceptualize and then implement what was in the early 1990s an innovative approach for integrating IT into elementary instructional practices. Then, because the proposed program was so innovative, I had to earn the trust and support of the elementary division principal, which was enthusiastically given because I kept him informed of each step, and then I had to assist the division principal in earning the support of a school board reluctant to fund what was not only an innovative, but expensive, IT program that introduced a technology platform that FIS had not used previously. To earn and sustain the support of elementary teachers and staff I developed and implemented a teacher professional development program during the first year and provided ongoing technical support to minimize frustrations as they learned the nuances of the new technology platform. To earn parent support, I engaged them in the program through an IT parent volunteer program and I offered an evening IT course for parents.

The regional manager with whom I had worked with the first three years I was with the publisher had told me I had the talent to lead and with my success

in leading the development and launch of FIS' elementary division's IT program I had tasted success as a leader, which whetted my appetite for school leadership. After six years overseas my husband and I decided to move back to Texas, as it would give me the opportunity to return to graduate school to earn my school leadership and management credentials and for us to be relatively nearby as both of our fathers were in declining health. In some ways our transition back to Texas was a more difficult one that our transition from Texas to Morocco, experiencing the same emotions in reverse. Going to Morocco, we were anxious about leaving family behind and yet excited for the opportunity, whereas going back to Texas we were excited about being closer to family but anxious about what lied ahead. On a practical basis, my technology experience overseas, particularly my work at FIS, captured the attention of a superintendent of a small school district in the Hill Country of Texas, which led to an offer to serve as the school district's IT coordinator, resulting in me having a job before we were on the ground in Texas.

Each of us in our own way silently struggled with the transition. We had no idea how much we had changed. We had gravitated to small towns when we returned thinking that because both of us had grown up in small towns our transition back into life in Texas would be easier there, but it proved not to be so as we came to realize that after living overseas for six years our interests went far beyond the city limits of those small towns. One Saturday morning two and a half years after our return, during a long leisurely breakfast, our individual struggles finally tumbled out. I had recently completed my graduate coursework and had passed my accreditation exam. With my school leadership and management credentials in hand we were discussing "What's next?" Sitting there on our screened-in back porch watching deer wander up from the canyon below the back our house to eat corn we put out every morning we came to realize that we were, at once, in paradise and prison. We loved the beautiful Texas Hill Country, but there were few options in the area where my career could become what we envisioned it could be. Other than very small districts, which generally recruited from outside the district, the school districts with multiple school campuses tended to "grow their own" school leaders or to hire beginning leaders at an entry level, such as assistant principal. Said simply, both of us realized opportunities for my career to advance in the Hill Country were limited due to the sparsity of school districts and their hiring practices. So, we sat there on our back porch that morning asking ourselves, "What do we want? A lovely setting? Or an opportunity for my career to blossom?" As we began sharing our feelings, we realized both of us were missing our expatriate lifestyle. One of us finally blurted out, then the other chimed in, "We need to be willing to move and go where we feel led to go" and with that it was settled. There would come a day when our shared dream of living and working in foreign countries would again be realized. We had both quietly struggled with it, afraid the other might not feel the same, but once it was out in the open, we immediately knew our shared dream would be realized again. It would be a few years before we moved back overseas and we did not talk about it often, but from that point on we lived with a quiet expectancy that when the time was right it would happen with us going where we felt led to go.