

....From the Korea-facing Global Business Toolbox: Strategies and Tactics

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This report shares my recent thoughts on top strategies and tactics for tackling Korean facing *global* business. Note global is emphasized, since working outside Korea within local subsidiary operations is my primary focus and specialty.

Strategy #1, Three Options

First, instead of the common western approach founded in considerable upfront research, discussion and review in which a sole, singular course of action is recommended—it's best to instead prepare three options with their related costs.

This approach allows Korean senior management to consider the options, a pre-requisite for decision making in Korea.

Some background on “Why 3 options?” Stepping back to the mid-2000s and a joint American and Korean management workshop that I facilitated for a client, one of Korean team managers pointed out that in Korea it was a norm to present multiple options. He explained that to support their leadership’s decision-making at least 3 options would be prepared for his seniors... and as many as 5 if the proposal was going to be elevated for review by their Chairman.

In most cases, following this initial presentation, leadership would ask for additional details requiring the team to drill deeper prior to a decision. All said, this process resulted in an approved course of action.

I also recall how not following this model can have consequence. I was called upon by a frequent Agency of the Year winner to assist in dealing with their Korean client and a relationship troubling the agency’s dedicated account team. Probing, I found the agency had presented what they felt was the best plan for their client—a well thought out global branding campaign for which the agency was confident in their decision.

The Korean client feedback was less than expected and came as a shock to the agency team. In my asking, and of little surprise to me, the Korean client was disappointed and had high hopes for a range of ideas from the agency. They had expected to be dazzled with creativity and not just a single idea. In my opinion, this

was driven by the advertising agency's world-class and award-winning creative reputation.

In following up with the Korean client, I recommended the agency also present the preliminary concept work which they had developed internally prior to picking what they felt was the best. This would allow the client to have a voice in the decision. Sadly, the agency was rigid in their thinking, feeling they had submitted their top work and that was sufficient. Not surprisingly, they parted ways some time later. Again, presenting options is key.

Strategy #2, A Trial Approach

This strategy is taking a Pilot or Trial Approach.... Recognizing the strong Korean cultural risk avoidance tendencies, I recommend offering a limited trial program as an option to mitigate fears and concerns—with costs scaled down proportionately from a bolder rollout. Depending on the project, this often can be demonstrated in a test market or dialed back to limit in scope.

In all cases, the pilot program needs to be flexible to expand in stages with associated incremental costs.

There is one caveat to this approach I often see taken in Korea. Once they test market a project and then decide to move forward, they execute a full rollout incredibly fast. My advice is to plan accordingly in advance with an action plan that includes a rapid roll out.... the faster the better.

This said, and as many of you have probably surmised, Strategy 1 and 2 do work well in tandem. This begs the question, "So what would I add to ensure success?"

In particular, as a next step, I would present the two strategies in a special format for Korean leadership.

Bonus Strategy, a Korea-facing Format

In the mid-2000s, I was on-boarding a new senior executive who had been recruited from Toyota by my Korea-facing client. In one of the first mentoring sessions, he asked for the Cover Page template for the Korean company having learned to use a Toyota SOP A4 template for all reports and proposals.

I knew the Korean company had a format for Korean language cover pages used in the reporting process to management, but I had not seen one in English. In fact, Western teams crafted reports for Korea, but one of the roles for the Korean expatriate coordinators assigned to local operations was translated and formatted these report for the HQ.

In particular, the cover page is a standardized A4 landscape layout so management can skim over quickly and get the gist. In needed, they can then dig deeper into the report deck.

Building on this, I suggest a similar format can be used in sharing reports with Korean teams and management. More so, it works well when used in conjunction with my 2 strategies.

... from Strategy to Insightful Tactics.

Many of us are familiar with the Korean term, *balli balli*. It translates as hurry-hurry. Actually, *balli* means hurry, but the word is always used in tandem adding to the need to move fast. I first recall hearing the word in the 1970s in martial arts class-- my Korean instructor at times commanding we move faster in executing a kicking drills.

...For many Korean firms, *balli balli* it's a de facto core value— with everything from immediately responding to requests for data to launching major projects. More to the point, it means things need to get done today and now, not tomorrow.

...For westerners, moving fast can often be a concern--conflicting with the Western business model of careful meticulous study and planning before implementation.

In fact, one complaint voiced with frustration by my Korean clients is how slow Westerners move on projects. In turn, my Western clients shake their head and argue Koreans want to jump into a project or situation with little preparation..... and *balli balli* seems to perpetuate a culture of waiting to the last minute.

More Than Meets the Eye...

Observing the Korean model for years, I have come to see where moving faster may be more than meets the eye. In fact, it's very entrepreneurial trait. When one shortens the time needed to complete a project, the focus is then on identifying the critical tasks that contribute most and with quickly moving on to execution.

In contrast, the longer the deadline, the more time gets spent in analysis and discussions with an ever-lessening focus on the task. The phenomenon is a corollary to Parkinson's Law (i.e. "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion"). In particular, we find end productivity and quality are equal or higher with a shorter deadline due to greater focus.

Recognizing *balli balli* is a trait of Korean business, I next will share what most Korean leadership would like to see included in their requests – and something rarely provided.

What are the "Alternatives"?

Communicating expectations is perhaps the greatest culture-related challenge in the global Korea facing workplace. Repeatedly, I witness a gap in what is “expected” and what is delivered, but before I share more....

In working with western and Korea teams and management, I listen carefully to questions raised in my weekly mentoring sessions and concern that surface. I then probe to get a clear understanding. The topic of expectations surfaced recently.

With regard to expectations, how for example Americans tackle a request and how Koreans would handle a request varies considerable. In the West, teams look for clear and defined objectives and goals. They then work diligently and responsibly to deliver within a set timeline and prepared to the pre-agreed parameters. Similarly, Korea teams plan and execute, but with one difference. An unspoken “Expectation” in Korea is that the team also look beyond the narrow and defined scope of the request and provide some “alternatives.” This providing of alternatives for management to consider is not voiced or communicated; it’s just a norm in the Korean workplace.

This said, in several recent mentoring sessions with both Korean leadership and with teams, the subject of alternatives came up.... in both cases work as requested was well done, but the Koreans had hoped to see some options.

In one of the cases, the Korean team member newly assigned to local operations was puzzled--assuming work performed would include some suggestions, too, and preferable “out of the box.”

I explained that most of the local team were highly specialized and long time, seasoned employees used to providing specific data and reports as requested. Frankly, they were not often called upon to look beyond the scope of a request, or even asked for suggestions.

I recommended in all the cases that when assigning a task or request, the Korean leadership and teams that as a deliverable they would like to see if possible some “out of the box alternatives”.

I, too, recommended, sharing often a message asking for Alternatives!!!

The “Why” behind...

More than a decade ago during a group session I hosted for overseas Korean and western senior managers, the discussion turned to the “role” of the westerners on teams engaged in local project development. The local western teams felt very under-utilized and wanted to contribute more. This, of course, was a source of considerable frustration for the westerners because their previous automotive OEM employers had given them considerable responsibility with little direct oversight and more fully utilized their experience and expertise.

Pondering for a moment during the discussion, a senior Korean pointed out that local input was respected, but perhaps this needed to be better communicated. The Korean manager went on to explain that his Korean teams knew how to do things "Korean style", but what was needed were other ways of approaching work related issues.

Even if the local ideas were not adopted, senior management reviewed those options and took them into consideration. In fact, Korean leadership had high trust in the local teams and their judgment--the local team providing much-needed expertise and know-how.

More recently in early 2016, a senior Korean leader I have been mentoring echoed the similar sentiment. First, how he felt local input was truly to be sought out and to be encouraged across the organization. And, second that seeking out "alternatives" was one of the company's core tenets transcending the Group's more contemporary updated values—but in actually deeply rooted solidly in the corporate culture.

The takeaway--share wherever possible Options and other ways of approaching work-related issues.

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