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CRUCIBLE

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Crucible

Transformative events that shape leaders



The Would-Be Pioneer

As a female American executive in South Korea, Linda Myers expected to open doors. Instead, she felt shut out. by Sarah Green

When Linda Myers accepted a human resources position at SK Telecom in South Korea, she thought it was the opportunity she'd long been working toward. Not only would she break ground as one of the first American female executives at a Korean company, she would also lead an initiative to make the organization more global. For someone who'd spent years consulting on expatriate transitions, this seemed like a dream job.

But as soon as Myers arrived in Seoul, she began to question her decision. Although she'd been in new cultural situations before, this one seemed more difficult to navigate. Without an official orientation or detailed guidance from her superiors, she struggled to understand the organization. She felt more isolated than she had expected: There were only a

few other Westerners on staff and just five other women at the VP level. Her straightforward American style was at odds with the polite formality of her Korean peers. And she eventually realized that she and her new employer had different ideas about what her role would be.

Over the next two years, exhilaration gave way to exhaustion. Rather than changing SK's culture, Myers felt marginalized—and then she was out of a job.

A Golden Opportunity

Myers had never heard of SK when a recruiter e-mailed her, in July 2007. "Dear Mr. Myers," the e-mail began.

"They assumed I was a man," she recalls. It was an innocent mistake, but it foreshadowed the misunderstandings to come.

At the time, Myers was a partner at WorldWise, a boutique consulting firm in Washington, DC, that helps multinationals such as Hewlett-Packard and ExxonMobil develop cross-cultural training programs. She loved the travel the position required—she'd spend a couple of months in, say, Ecuador or the Czech Republic—and a permanent foreign assignment seemed like a logical next step.

Myers's stints abroad had started early. At age 11, she'd spent time in Norway with the nonprofit Children's International Summer Villages. A junior year in London through a Goucher College program preceded graduate studies at Harvard and a series of jobs involving extensive international travel. By the time she was 40, she had lived in, worked on, or traveled to all seven continents—even Antarctica.

One of these jobs had been with the China Human Resources Group, which facilitates joint ventures between U.S.-based multinationals and Chinese companies. When China was first opening up to international business, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Myers prepped executives to work as expats there. She saw the job with SK as her chance to be an expat in Asia's fourth-largest economy, then growing by 5% per year. Like other Korean conglomerates (such as LG, Samsung, and Hyundai)

SK Holdings—SK Telecom's parent, which has other subsidiaries in gas, construction, life sciences, and hospitality—was trying to become a more globally minded organization. To Myers, who had been the director of change management at Wyeth Pharmaceuticals before joining WorldWise, it seemed like a perfect fit.

The recruiter's initial e-mail marked the start of a six-month interview process, including trips to New York and Santa Clara, California. Follow-up e-mail communications stretched through the fall.

"I was working with a young man who spoke enough English to be the liaison for his boss, who spoke a little bit less English," Myers recalls. That was to be

Even with colleagues who spoke English, Myers found it difficult to get the information she needed.

expected in negotiations with a Korean company for a job in Korea, but the two-language game of telephone sometimes led to confusion.

Still, she pressed ahead. In October, SK Telecom formally offered her a job. During a preliminary trip to Seoul in December, she was introduced as the new hire—even though, to her mind, she had not yet accepted the position. Feeling that this was her best opportunity to work abroad, she decided to take the leap.

Struggling to Fit In

On the ground in Seoul, Myers quickly realized just how far she was from her native New York. One early shock was the homogeneity of not only her office but also the city: Government estimates indicate that foreigners account for 2.4% of the population. That's compared with just over 18% for Singapore and 27% for New York and London, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Another surprise was her inability to communicate effectively. Myers had always considered herself to be skilled on

this front: Born to deaf parents, by the age of three she was taking phone calls and translating between spoken English and American Sign Language. But her lack of Korean turned out to be a vexing problem. She recalls having to ask for an interpreter at her first meetings at SK. And even with an assistant and colleagues who spoke English, she found it difficult to get the information she needed. "Asking questions was the only way I knew to learn," she explains. "But it was not always productive." As she saw it, even diplomatic inquiries could be construed as confrontational and critical.

She was also unprepared for the company's rigid hierarchy. A spokesman

for SK notes that "SK is recognized as one of the first Korean companies to abolish hierarchic management, [and] even at companies that have not, communication among employees is open and vibrant." But as Myers saw it, "there were basically four levels: VP, director, manager, and worker bee. You only talked to people at your level." Moreover, she was constantly aware of being female. Aside from secretaries, she was almost always the only woman in the room.

After the years Myers spent advising expats, perhaps she should have anticipated these challenges, but they were nonetheless difficult to handle.

Outside the office was a different story. She forged friendships in the expat community, soaked up local culture (sometimes literally, as with the Boryeong Mud Festival), and relished quiet time in her 33rd-floor apartment overlooking the Han River, downtown Seoul, and the peaks of Mount Bukhansan. Still, it was not easy to shake off the troubles at work.

Dae Ryun Chang, a professor at Yonsei School of Business in Seoul, says that

Myers's situation was not uncommon, noting that while big Korean conglomerates have wanted to recruit Western staff, there seems to be a disconnect in attitudes about work practices, particularly performance criteria, which in Korea "span not just formal key indices but informal and political ones."

In spite of these challenges, Myers advanced at SK. Four months after her arrival, she moved on to be head of Global Talent at SK Holdings. But leadership shake-ups changed the tenor of this role. Myers felt increasingly left out of key meetings and conversations, in part because language was still a problem, even though, according to SK, she by then had a mostly bilingual team, including three non-Koreans.

Although Myers saw her role as that of a change agent, she struggled to implement new practices and policies. "At the lower

Myers thought her superiors wanted her to overhaul the culture, but their ideas about change and how to execute it were completely different from hers.

and middle levels, I think that people were very excited, very eager for change," she explains. "But at the top, most of the leadership was nervous."

Kim Tran, an SK Telecom employee originally from Vietnam, offers a more critical assessment: "She could have done certain things differently, but the result would have been the same. They didn't implement anything that she did—and she had some great ideas."

The SK spokesman disputed these characterizations. "We understand that living and working in Korea may have been challenging for [Ms. Myers] personally, but efforts were made on our side to ensure that all reasonably necessary assistance was not neglected."

By early 2009, Myers could tell she was on her way out. "My team leaders would barely speak to me," she says.

Finally, her boss called her into his office and explained that although they had extended her contract once, they would not do so again.

In some ways, it was easy to leave SK. But Myers was disappointed not to have had an impact at the company and to be leaving a city she had come to love.

Hard-Won Wisdom

Looking back, Myers says her experience drove home several lessons. These were directives she had often given consulting clients, but like much good advice, they were easier to talk about than to implement.

First, learn as much as possible about the obstacles you'll face and acknowledge when they might be too much for you. Before Myers accepted the offer from SK, she asked the Society for Human Resource Management to put her

in touch with another American woman who had worked for a Korean firm, but no one in their records fit that description. She realized too late the challenges of being a trailblazer. "There were no other examples," she laughs. "So I was self-taught."

However, her experience prepping clients to work for Western multinationals in China and other countries did not easily translate to her situation in Korea. She now says the reading she did before arriving covered only about a fifth of what she needed to know, and on-the-ground learning was tougher than she had imagined.

Second, understand your mandate. Myers took a job thinking her superiors wanted her to overhaul the culture at SK and stay with the company for the long term. But their ideas about change and

how to execute it were completely different from hers, and they intended her stint to be relatively short. Ideally, these are points to iron out with a prospective employer during the interview process—even if it involves difficult questions, issued through a translator.

Third, don't let day-to-day misunderstandings bother you. "At times I felt I was misunderstood or treated unfairly because I was a foreigner." She points to a disagreement with a Korean peer about serving on a working group. Thinking it might have stemmed from a cultural misunderstanding, she consulted a third party. But when the peer heard she had done so, he was furious. "I had caused him great embarrassment," she remembers. After that, she tried to keep in mind that not every communication failure is a cross-cultural issue.

Fourth, take more time than you think you need to introduce new ways of working, even if the changes seem tiny. For example, early on she asked employees to dispense with calling her "Sang Mu Linda," her title at the company, and to use Linda, the norm in a U.S. company, to create a less formal environment. "But by removing the label, I plummeted in their eyes," she recalls. What she regarded as a "participative leadership style" looked wishy-washy to the people at SK.

Myers acknowledges the mistakes she made but does not regret accepting the position. "I knew I was taking a career risk," she says, "but the adventure, the contribution, and just the fact that I was there—as a foreign woman—were important."

She's since returned to consulting and—having struggled to practice what she once preached—now considers herself to be a better adviser. "Those years in Seoul taught me to question my own actions and assumptions," she says. "I realized that my leadership style had been shaped by a particular environment and that my way was not always best." ♥

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