

Maurer's Healthcare Insight (125)

Home Office Friends or Back Stabbers

P. Reed Maurer

Once upon a time I was a home office marketing type who sallied forth to affiliates with a mission to tell them how to sell cephalosporin antibiotics. We had all the answers based on our US experience and believed they should be transferred intact to the hinterlands.

After one such visit to a country in the southern hemisphere, the VP for that region invited me to his office for a report about my visit. You must appreciate this VP was a real international business man, a rare breed these days. That is, a person who lives and works in foreign markets versus only visiting them.

While giving my report I criticized the local affiliate management. I cannot remember the criticism, but his reaction is burned into my memory. He quietly got up from behind his desk, walked to the open door, closed it and returned to his chair. And then in a not so quiet tone proceeded in no uncertain terms to clearly tell me I was not qualified to criticize his people. He wanted home office staff support and assistance for guys who, unlike me, had P&L responsibility. They had to make the numbers not me.

There are many home office staff visitors who could benefit from this same advice. A guy running operations in a market like Japan needs all the help he can get. He does not need people who believe, "If he is out in front the only way to shoot him is in the back."

To be fair, visitors are often frustrated by not being able to communicate with many employees in the Japan office. And those who can communicate are reluctant to engage in meaningful debate, or they rely on meaningless cop outs like, "Japan is different." New York is very different from San Francisco but this statement alone says nothing. Best thing to do with people who constantly tell you Japan is different is to lock them in a closet and throw the key away.

So what can the top guy in Japan do to win home office friends versus back stabbers? Let us count the ways.

1. Build a *gaijin* buffer zone akin to the green zone Americans built in Iraq. That is, bring in ex-pats to head your operations like marketing, HR, development, regulatory, government affairs, etc. The end



result will be an executive committee of all non-Japanese.

Home office visitors will be very comfortable with this group and they won't need to go out of the zone to find out what is really going on. Guys who use this tactic are very interested in a big promotion back to the home office. By the way, it usually works, and the condition of the Japan business will be a problem for his replacement.

2. Do not get socially involved with visitors. Don't take them to your home as you would friends. If you do take them into your home and mention the rent is \$10,000 per month that fact will spread around the home office water coolers as an example of extravagant living and wasteful use of company money.

Best to assign your Japanese staff to take visitors out for dinner, preferably a Japanese restaurant where the food is hard to describe. If the local foreign head takes visitors to such restaurants he will be accused (behind his back) of eating too much rice, (read gone native).

3. Retain high priced consultants to do studies on issues raised by home office staff. The higher the price the better because in this crazy space price is directly correlated with credibility.

Of course you want to make sure the consultants report what you want them to say. They will be happy to oblige to guarantee repeat business. Your visitors are bound to be impressed with the professional nature of your operation. Ditto this advice for key personnel moves. Your home office HR function will highly rate your judgment.

4. Try to be on a business trip outside Japan when your employees have a company outing. Japanese enjoy this company group togetherness when they to go out overnight or travel outside Japan. Home office people may overlook the Japanese for this kind of intimate socializing, but criticize you for getting too close to employees, particularly the females on your staff. Pictures of people sitting around drinking in *yukatas* remind people of what they experienced at a fraternity toga party.

5. Do not encourage any visitor, particularly, your boss, to bring his wife on a business trip to Japan. These wives would never understand the company outing described above.

Furthermore, your Japanese partners and employees feel very uncomfortable including their own wives in a business function. In fact the wives themselves do not want to attend such events. The end result is a visiting wife who believes you are not creating good morale among your staff or with key business partners. This conclusion will certainly be communicated to the wife's husband.

6. Be an active member of the pharma trade association and chamber of commerce. Make sure you know your embassy staff and ambassador. These actions will confirm your loyalty to the motherland and industry. You will gain a kind of statesmanlike image fit for an industry leader.

This will also lend credibility to your analysis of business in Japan because you cite broad industry opinions. Same idea as using a consultant. If you take a visitor for a short chat with an Ambassador, your stock will gain more than a few points. I was

once able to have our visiting CEO meet the PM of Japan in a private setting. My bonus that year was generous.

7. Do not advertise your home leave plans if you intend to travel to exotic locations other than your home town. People get jealous if they perceive you are getting perks not available to themselves. A big

mistake I made was to buy a place in Hawaii. The same amount of money for place on the New Jersey shore would have been politically proper.

8. If you have a company driver make sure visitors are told this is not for your personal use, but others in the company use this service on business.

I wish I could go on but my word count reached its limit. Maybe I can pick up more advice on this subject from people who know how to win home office friends and continue this subject in another article. Until then watch your back.



P. Reed Maurer was not very good at home office politics, but an ace tennis player does not always become a good coach.