Making It To The Top

Tips for development practitioners pursuing international leadership roles

THE CANOPY LAB

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Who gets to lead international development programs and why? This question guides the Canopy Lab's Inclusion and Leadership series and is central to our underlined study on the career transition of national staff which is summarized here.

This brief highlights three evidenced based strategies for emerging leaders in international development interested in pursuing international leadership roles. It summarizes our recent study on the <u>career catalysts</u> that supported the career transition of national staff into international leadership roles on Market Systems Development (MSD) programs. It is intended for emerging leaders and the implementing partners and donors in a position to support them.

#1 BUILD A TEAM OF ADVOCATES

Our research revealed the importance of finding people who will sponsor your career advancement. Sponsors are respected leaders in the field who will vouch for your capabilities and likelihood of success in a new project/location/culture. This could be someone more senior within your organization who advocates for you during an internal hiring process or someone you've previously worked with who will attest to your skills during an external hiring process.

What I wish I knew ...?

"I didn't' realize how much of a blessing, starting off my MSD career on a flagship Market Systems Development (MSD) project would be. At that time, only expats were hired to become senior leaders of projects. However, with the evolution of MSD and commitment from the donors to test innovative approaches, the structure of the project evolved, and that created opportunities for learning and growth for me and my fellow national staff.

Reflecting upon my MSD journey, I wish I had access to the learning and networking opportunities that exist now for the MSD field. That would have helped me grow faster and go further. Fortunately, with the proliferation of MSD projects across the world, there are now many more resources than before for potential MSD leaders."

– Fouzia Nasreen, MSD Advisor

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> "Having someone who knew me beforehand helped me a lot in getting [an international] job. if I had someone who did not know me beforehand, my chances of getting that job might not have been that easy. I think, the fact that the person knew me and trusted me, played a big role in him for letting me in."

In addition to securing sponsors, our research found that coaches and mentors play a crucial role in career advancement of national staff. Mentoring and coaching are individual-focused learning methods. While related, they do have their distinctions. Mentoring is a relationship, usually long-term, where a mentor offers advice about the values, norms, and systems of a particular field or organization. Coaching, on the other hand, is a more structured, goal-oriented process where a coach helps an individual develop specific skills or improve performance in a particular area - even as basic as in building communication skills for external audience or international platforms. The coach or mentor is typically an expert in the relevant field and uses their experience to guide and support the individual.

Several women respondents highlighted the valuable role that coaches played in encouraging them to apply for stretch positions; something that they would not normally feel comfortable doing because they did not meet all the criteria (a common phenomenon among women professionals).

> "I worked under very strong but also very smart leadership. They were very interested in seeing team development. They had open conversations with me about what I wanted to build and provided feedback on whether I was on the right track. They gave constructive feedback, both in terms of the technical areas, but also in terms of the day-to-day social elements, like how do you grapple with personal life choices and all that in your career pathways… They made it very easy for me to communicate with them about what I want, and how do I get there."

#2 BE SEEN AND HEARD

Building a brand is no longer just for Instagram or Tik Tok influencers, visibility is also important for becoming a senior leader on an international development program. Visibility (in this case) is when an organization deliberately builds a professional's profile within the organization, on a global scene, or with a specific audience

> "Confidence -- You can find someone who's smart, but they don't have the confidence to present themselves, to articulate their thoughts and stuff like that. Or they feel they can't contribute to some discussions. But [my COP] created that space for us to contribute to discussions. He would take me to any meeting, you know, whether it's with the Mission Director, the ambassador, or someone from Washington, DC. He would literally take me to those meetings, and be like, 'You've got to speak. This is your space. Speak.' And I think that helped build my capacity, but also built my confidence in terms of what I think I can do, not just in my area, or my country, but also elsewhere."

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Short-term assignments or temporary duty assignments (TDYs), were also essential, to the transition from national staff to international leader, for many. These assignments gave staff confidence that they could succeed on an international program (a critical factor, considering the lifetime of messaging, direct and indirect, they received that their expertise is less valued than the expertise of an international staff or consultant). It also helped them plug into broader networks and information on international opportunities.

> "You'll never get feedback from the people that you look up to, saying that you are ready. You will look at opportunities at the expat level, and you will never try [for them]. If I was not called to take up a role to do an assessment in [another country] and never had interactions with expats there who said, 'Oh you are ready [to be international], why are you delaying?' – I think I would have remained until today as a national staff."

Experience on a flagship program and a degree from a reputable western university were two other ways that national staff were able to increase their visibility and mobility within the MSD community.

> "In international development, [a flagship program] gives you some sense of credibility with people and recruiters. There used to be a time when Katalyst was the most popular MSD program. And anything that is Katalyst was seen as the gold standard, so that really helped. And it gives people visibility as the case may be. If you've ever worked for some of those successful programs, it gives you a platform for you to get noticed. [In addition to your experience], working for a particular program is very helpful giving you leverage to make that transition."

> "My goal was to get international degree because I knew that if I get an international degree, I can apply for international jobs. I only had a master's in economics in [my country].... So it was very simple. I wouldn't have had that access most likely, if I didn't know have an international master['s] degree."

PROVEN PATHWAYS

Roles in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations (FCAS) offered a stepping stone to an international career. Because of the challenges in recruiting for these positions, respondents found that the criteria may be less restrictive in practice than on paper.

"I met a lot of [fellow nationals], you know, who started their first assignment in fragile countries, like Afghanistan or Yemen. In my case, it definitely helped me and many other colleagues. You need, you know, what you call a break somewhere, right? And [this fragile country] at that time, they required a lot of international staff, right? And not everyone probably was willing to go there. That means those who dared and who really wanted it, you know, for them, it was definitely a case of a lucky break. And I think in my case, I would acknowledge that aspect."

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#3 BE A LIFE-LONG LEARNER

Training was the most often cited factor for the career transition of national staff into international roles. Training refers to formal professional development courses. They can focus on hard, technical skills (e.g. market systems development) or they can focus on soft skills (e.g. leadership skills, management, communications, etc.). It is important to note that while training was the most cited catalyst in the career transition, the majority of respondents cited three or more catalysts being material.

> "I had chance to participate in the Springfield Center. I interacted with many participants from other development programs. I was quite junior, quite young, and there were very senior people in the training. That gave me confidence that what I know, and what I have learned, has some value."

> "I participated in what we call emerging leadership program, which is really focused on emotional intelligence: how do you become a good leader and all that? I think those were very helpful for me as I was getting more into managerial roles, having so many teams to manage. You may be very strong analytically, but if you do not work with people, especially in the field of MSD where most times you have to play an advisory role and technical guiding role."

Becoming an international leader is not easy and our research confirmed the sad reality that our industry is held back because of the sticky and icky biases that lurk below the surface (more on this here). That said, our research and this brief provide proven tactics for emerging leaders to further their careers and engage their employers in conversations about how to make and advocate for a more enabling envronment.

The responsibility to advocate for change does not rest on the shoulders of emerging leaders alone. Our research also offers insights on how implementing partners and donors can contribute to leveling the playing field. Specifically, the research shows how implementing partners can proactively integrate and institutionalize, with the tacit support of donors, the identified catalysts (coaching/mentoring, short-term assignments, sponsorship, training, visibility) into their HR strategies for long-term development of core staff. These investments will expand opportunities for emerging leaders and contribute to the industry's objectives around diversity, equity and inclusion.

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