
Are You Ready to Lead Overseas?



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

Working in a foreign country can be a great experience, it can also be the biggest mistake of your life. The stress of living in an alien environment can shatter the most stable of relationships and leave you wondering just where your career is heading. Are you ready for the change?

Just because you've travelled a lot doesn't make you immune from culture shock.

It didn't take Antonio long to realise his family's relocation to Brazil was going to be more complex than expected. When his wife, Marion had been appointed head of sales for Latin America they presented the idea to their children as an adventure, one they were all excited to make. Antonio had imagined that living in a completely different place would give him the inspiration to work on a novel. The reality was very different and the whole family was having a hard time adapting to the new life.

Although they overcame the language barrier remarkably fast, it hadn't been easy for the children to adjust to a new school. For Antonio getting everything in the new house working was frustrating. Workmen promised to

come for repairs, but failed to turn up and his writing project was not going anywhere; there were just too many things to be taken care of.

While Marion was on a fast track with her job and very excited doing what she was doing, there were times when she wondered, what was ahead once she completed her present assignment? She also felt disconnected from what was happening at the home office. She spent long hours at work and often came home totally exhausted, making a half-hearted effort to read a story to the children before becoming absorbed by email and falling asleep.

What had been once a relationship of intimacy and care had changed into one of irritation and distance. If things continue the way they were going, they could end up each going separate ways.

With stories like Antonio and Marion's being typical of a significant number of expatriate experiences, it's not surprising the range of failed expat assignments fluctuates between 10 and 50 percent depending on the country - with executives transferred to an emerging economy facing a higher risk of failure than those sent to a developed one.

The inability to adapt to the new culture, to cope with the associated challenges of doing things differently and having to deal with limited spousal employment opportunities have all been cited as significant factors to failed expatriate assignments.

Hard skills don't guarantee success

Despite studies linking the success of international assignments to the expatriate's spousal or family relationships, very few companies assess marital and family motivation and psychological preparedness when making overseas appointments. Often the primary criterion for choosing an executive to work abroad is technical competence. If an executive has done a good job, the assumption is that he or she will be able to do an equally stellar job in another country. After all, an executive is supposed to be someone who has the competence and confidence to sort out any problems that come his or her way - if something goes wrong, he or she should be able to fix it.

While technical skills are necessary, they are not sufficient. Certain interpersonal qualities and attitudes are also needed to make an assignment in another culture a success.

Cultural adaptability is a major factor. Executives who are culturally adaptable usually hold the belief that every culture has developed its own way of managing and one's (culturally-determined) way is not necessarily superior. They are usually seen as being open-minded, self-confident, curious, able to relate to people and deal with ambiguity.

I've also found the greater consideration paid to a candidate's **emotional intelligence**, during the selection process, the higher the success rate in the assignment. Unfortunately, criteria for selection are all too frequently developed in a vacuum and the advice of the host-country nationals - the people who are to work with the expatriate manager - is rarely sought.

As in the case of Antonio, another extremely important element of an expatriate executive's success is the **experience of spouse and children**. The most frequent reason for an executive's failure to complete an assignment in another country is the negative reaction of the spouse. Despite this, very few companies interview spouses during the selection procedure, and a far smaller percentage include spouses in training programmes.

In psychological terms, I've noted that successful expats often possess a personality that combines slightly paradoxical characteristics. On the one hand, they have an **'as if' characteristic**, the ability to conduct themselves in a chameleon-like way, to pick up signals from the external world and mould themselves and their behaviour accordingly.

On the other hand, they possess a set of **resilient core values** that guide them and provide support in whatever environment they find themselves.

'Going native' is not the answer, but neither is staying aloof from the host culture. A middle position must be found.

Companies can proactively prepare their executives for international assignments in a number of ways. International executive development courses develop cultural awareness and adaptability.

On-the-job training offers education of another sort, and is no less vital. Exposure early in one's career to international leadership experiences, including working in international teams, is important. These experiences hone a person's capacity to cope with difficult leadership challenges later in the career cycle.

Cross-cultural coaching

The question can be asked whether the senior executives in Marion's company had reflected sufficiently on the impact of the couple's move to Brazil; whether they had paid enough attention to the 'softer', not just technical considerations, concerning the move. It would have been useful if - from day one of the expat assignment - an executive coach had been available to both Marion and Antonio to ensure their success in their personal and professional lives.

Global companies need to ensure that cross-cultural coaching is available in every international posting. Enlisting such people can powerfully and effectively assist expatriates and their families in dealing with the many challenges that emerge during the course of an expatriate assignment. Making this part of an expat package will be a win-win proposition for all the parties involved.

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