



The Two-Edged Swords of Global Cosmopolitans

People who live in many countries develop adaptive strengths that can also be weaknesses if not understood.

Joseph has a special gift for negotiation. He has a way of finding compromise and clarity with the most difficult opponent. He didn't learn this skill at business school but growing up in suffering and exile where conflict was a perpetual guest. Joseph was eight when his family fled political turmoil in Lebanon. After settling in the U.K., his father spent much of his time traveling home to manage a family business. Joseph quickly took on the adult role of negotiating to provide for his family's needs.

His winning ways helped his mother take care of financial problems and even got scholarships for himself and his siblings to excellent schools. Bright, charming and adaptable, Joseph excelled at school and then at work. Everyone knew him as an expert negotiator, able to bring calm to any situation and find win-win situations for even the most trivial of problems. But what his colleagues didn't know was that as his skill got sharper at work, it was waning at home. He was so concerned about calming conflict with his parents that he was ruining one of the most important decisions of his life.

While working in China, Joseph had fallen in love with a Chinese woman and wanted to marry her. But his parents insisted he marry someone similar to his own family background. He wanted to please everyone and simply avoided the conflict, which only caused everyone involved a great deal of pain.

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"I am a great negotiator", Joseph said, "but I cannot deal with conflict in my own family."

I call this dilemma a "two-edged sword of mobility".

The hidden downsides

How did Joseph's strength become such a weakness?

As I explained in my **last post**, Global Cosmopolitans learn valuable lessons of adaptation to the challenges of change and complexity in their lives. They easily learn and use new ways of thinking. But there can often be a downside to the incredible skills they acquire.

The old expression "there's no arguing with success" explains why the paradoxical nature of strengths often remains hidden. Each success of adapting to new environments reinforces the strength and reduces the incentive to look for downsides or the availability of better adaptations.

Typical examples include executives who can move anywhere, anytime, but get bored in one place for too long. Some are so flexible and willing to adapt that it affects their ability to get what they want or to state clearly what they need. Some are so autonomous that they don't know how to get help

when they need it.

To reach their full potential, Global Cosmopolitans need to understand both sides of the blade.

Identifying your two-edged sword

Using the notion of two-edged swords, Global Cosmopolitans should actively strive to identify paradoxes in some of their most treasured abilities.

Miki moved every few years when she was a child. It was painful for her to leave friends and situations where she knew how to do well, but she developed a pattern of adaptability and was always able to fit in as a local whether in Spain or Italy. She learned how to bring different perspectives to a situation but not her own. She also learned how to be independent but this made it difficult for her to delegate at work. After looking at her situation through the scope of two-edged swords, Miki realised that while adaptation to new environments came naturally, if she were more down-to-earth and had a strong self-identity, she could clearly see whether a new place is really comfortable or whether she is just pretending to fit in.

She then took this awareness a step further, discovering how both sides of the sword could help her gain a better understanding of herself. “Such insecurity of not having an identity is not a pleasant side to discover but I’m glad I’ve discovered this and that it could be one of the core anxieties that lies below many of my other issues,” she said.

The myths of personality

Sometimes, what people think of as the essence of their identity is more perception than reality. Developing awareness of what I call “personal myths” can shed light on this process. Just as our strengths are not always as strong as we think they are, many stories that become part of our identities are not necessarily as real as we think.

Myths can develop when people draw the wrong lessons from life experiences or they keep using lessons after they’ve served their purpose. The powerful stories evolve slowly, unconsciously, compressing the intricacies of real individuals into simplified molds of the people we either like to be or fear we might become. These internal characters personify self-concepts such as being adaptable, perfect or high achieving.

Stories of living in five countries in seven years can convey an image of being highly cosmopolitan; the freedom can be so exhilarating that a Global Cosmopolitan starts to feel defined by the lifestyle. But at some point, the frequent moves and transitions, the constant disconnection and

noninvolvement, transform the freedom into a limitation.

Since myths can have a profound effect on whether Global Cosmopolitans reach their potential at work and home, learning to counteract myths can be essential for future development.

Understanding the paradoxical effects of global citizenship will help Global Cosmopolitans see the sources of their strengths but also their limitations. From these insights, they can shift their silent, internal journey onto new, more productive paths and rid themselves of emotional burdens that have weighed them down.

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