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# How to Unveil Your Inner Global Cosmopolitan



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour

**Your own life story is more interesting than you think. Learning how to tell it right can open new opportunities.**

Thierry had been working in Asia for five years when I first met him. A French citizen, his passport no longer defined his national identity. He explained that his work had given him a unique opportunity to learn and grow as a person and manager.

“I am ambivalent about returning to France,” he said. “My friends miss me and want me back but they never seem interested in what I have been doing in Asia or what I have learned. Looking for a job there has been challenging, since the interviewers seem more interested in what I did in France rather than what I have done here. I have to help them understand the value of a global experience.”

Thierry’s experience is not unusual and is one of many stories I have heard while teaching the increasingly talented, highly educated, multilingual and mobile population of people I have come to call “Global Cosmopolitans”. People who have lived, worked and studied for extensive periods in different

countries, have views of the world and themselves that are profoundly affected by the reality of cross-border living and coping with the challenges that emerge on their diverse journeys.

## **Invisible identities**

But Global Cosmopolitans like Thierry all have one challenge in common; they've been on amazing journeys that can show externally, but their internal journeys are relatively invisible ones. It is the subtle, yet important differences that most people can't see that makes it difficult for them to articulate, often leaving them feeling misunderstood.

They have often developed skills that allow them to think flexibly and creatively to find workable solutions to complex work and life challenges, which might not be obvious to others. However, they often face a lack of recognition at work for what they have learned and opportunities commensurate with their level of experience and knowledge. What is asked of them is often narrowly applied to their current situation. The first step is an improved process of communication: knowing yourself, knowing your story and then communicating that knowledge when appropriate.

## **Ghosn wanderin'**

Carlos Ghosn, the chairman and CEO of Renault-Nissan is a Global Cosmopolitan who knows how to tell his story. His parents are Lebanese, but he was born in Brazil where his father worked for an airline. When he was six, he and his mother returned to live in Lebanon where he continued his education. He went to Paris to study engineering. After working in France, he returned to Brazil to work for Michelin, then went to the United States to run the company's North American operations. From there, he returned to France to work for Renault and then took the top job at Nissan, the first non-Japanese person to hold the company's symbolic title of president.

Ghosn is able to tell his story because he has this clarity. For example, he urges managers to "love the country and love the culture [you are in] and make sure that all the people you are transferring with are of the same opinion."

His ability to see the developmental links in his story motivates him to let other people know who they are, what possibilities they see and how they can achieve their goals. Having the personal knowledge, combined with the

ability to use one's story to motivate and challenge others is often seen as a key ingredient for leadership.

## **Know yourself, know your story**

Here are a few tips on how Global Cosmopolitans can use their experience to enhance their potential and leadership profile, like Ghosn.

**Know yourself:** Devote the time to know yourself. Global Cosmopolitans should pay attention to their identity stories and adjust them over time. The more they realise and know, the smoother their journey can be. Self-awareness is a powerful tool that can be revisited over time to redefine the ever-shifting understanding of their environment and themselves.

**Know the stories others tell about you:** Other people's perceptions can have more influence on a person's possibilities for development in relationships and at work. Others will make certain assumptions, which can give Global Cosmopolitans the opportunity to understand the reactions of others and adapt their approach accordingly. This means seeking informal feedback channels in addition to the formal ones found at work.

**Know your story:** Take time to convey your identity story. Don't assume it is uninteresting. Move beyond a simple sense of who you are and actually convey your authentic self. Finding relationships where you're understood can be challenging, but again, don't take your skills for granted. The art of communicating overseas can enhance your ability to find creative ways to work on key relationships.

## **The unseen treasure**

It is evident that Global Cosmopolitans might want to understand more about themselves, but why should others strive to know them better, especially organisations? Consider Daniel, a highly competent analyst with a passion for climbing, both literally and metaphorically. His passion and ability to take on complex projects is not reflected in the work he has been asked to do. He is getting restless and thinking about leaving his company. What he needs is the opening to talk about what he knows and loves in order to map out a path to the next level.

Meaningful and effective dialogue is crucial to understand what motivates Global Cosmopolitans and what unused skills they can contribute to an organisation. For example, Human Resources might know a Global

Cosmopolitan can speak English and French but completely miss the fact that he or she is also fluent in Spanish and quite articulate in German. Commuting from New York to Argentina might be an option for an executive managing a venture there but the company might never learn about her extensive network of contacts and knowledge built during high school there.

Important details are often lost because of the difficulty that Global Cosmopolitans face in trying to articulate their complex experiences. But if their lessons of global mobility can be unlocked and communicated, Global Cosmopolitans can expect richer relationships and broader opportunities. In my next post, I will explore how companies can tap into the minds of these globe-trotting individuals and put their skills to work.

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