
Embracing the Complexity of Global Mobility



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Understanding their own experience of change can help globally mobile executives deal with it.

Amy and Jeff both love working in Singapore. Growing up in England, they had never imagined their global lifestyle. They had been living together for 15 years and had already lived in Malaysia and Indonesia before they moved to Singapore five years ago. Their two children are in an international pre-school and they have a live-in maid who enables their busy lifestyle. Decision-making had been pretty simple for them, until the events of last month.

Amy had already been contemplating a career move in Singapore, when she received a fabulous, but exploding, offer in Dubai. Jeff was happy with his career options in Southeast Asia, so he was not excited about moving away. Then he received a phone call from his mother which changed everything. His father just had a second serious heart attack. While Jeff had been highly career driven, he found himself starting to question what was most important in life.

For global cosmopolitans like Amy and Jeff, change is normal. It brings opportunities for learning, stretches creative thinking and enhances personal development. Living globally sounds like some sort of peripatetic paradise, and for some it is. But it also raises many complex challenges. Where is home? What nationality should the children be? Does it matter? For Jeff, it was now about discovering what's best for his wife and parents, as well as himself.

Over the years, I've developed a framework to help people making such decisions do so with greater clarity. It's called **the Seven C's of Change and Development**. This is useful both as a descriptive and a diagnostic tool. Each of the Seven Cs represents a stage of the change cycle where issues have to be resolved to advance to the next step.

Stage 1: Complexity

The first stage, complexity, consists of identifying and understanding the variety of implications created by a change.

Amy and Jeff started out making lists, but neither knew how to set priorities. Jeff, who hates indecision, said that he wanted to quit and go back home to London. Amy, who has always been open to multiple possibilities for major decisions, knew that time was not on her side. She knew she needed help and started asking for it from friends, co-workers and her current boss. Jeff felt like he had made a decision, and that he had no need to talk it through with anyone. Amy feared regrets on his part and wanted him to be able to live with the consequences of this decision.

Speaking with friends and coaches helped both of them decide that Dubai would work for both of them. It was closer to London and could provide interesting options for her, and hopefully Jeff.

The issue of aging parents becomes bigger over time but in a mixed family, country of origin can add to complexity both culturally and professionally. In some cultures, children are expected to care for their parents at home and move home to do so. Identifying all of these variables helps a couple, and indeed, a family, frame the challenge.

Stage 2: Clarity

The objective of this stage is to achieve a coherent understanding of the complex issues raised in the first stage and start to form a plan.

Jeff realised that getting closer to London would make a difference for him. He envisioned five years in Dubai, if he could find work that he enjoyed, to build a pathway to working in London. He also had a long talk with his parents which helped him calm anxiety and focus on his family's move.

Amy also sought information from her prospective employer on the type of travel commitments involved with the new role, with an eye to being present with family and supporting Jeff's ambitions. It's important at this stage that moving couples identify options for their children too, such as schools, social activities and networks of friends. This helps with the next stage.

Stage 3: Confidence

Jeff was willing to explore options in Dubai, but he knew that he needed more time and needed to address his concern of having the right contacts in a new region. Just knowing he could have more time gave him the confidence that he'd be able to find something ideal. Children might worry that their parents' new jobs might mean more travel and time away from home. Hearing their concerns can be useful to reassure them while reinforcing your own confidence.

Stage 4: Creativity

By this stage it should have become apparent that new solutions may be needed to tackle the problems at hand.

Jeff realised that a number of options would emerge if he had some more management experience and training. Up until now he had only managed people who were experts in the oil and gas industry. He recognised that he may have to move out of his area of expertise and had been contemplating working in alternative energy, or another area completely. But he knew that he could not move to Dubai without a job offer. If he wanted to change industry he needed to go somewhere where they were willing to invest in his development as a manager. He found that looking outside of his comfort zone actually felt right and opened creative ways to develop his career.

Creativity can sometimes mean letting go of the idea that you must continue to follow your current path. In Jeff's case, this meant looking at alternative career options, but it could also mean a staggered move, with one partner moving first and the other taking time to find the right fit before committing to the change.

Stage 5: Commitment

At this point, one has to realise that there is no single right or perfect answer. Successful change is based on commitment to a good, realistic solution that is well implemented. However, taking the first steps can often close options and generate anxiety, making it a difficult stage.

While Jeff and Amy remained committed to moving back to England within five years, they recognised that the move to Dubai was a better way to begin the process of re-entry for both of them. They knew that the transition would not be easy. Amy had to start her job while Jeff was working out the details of leaving his old firm and joining a new organisation. Saying goodbye to friends, finding schools and live-in help for their children, and managing all of the appropriate paper work for the move was complicated and time consuming, but they started to see the move as a fresh start.

Stage 6: Consolidation

They realised that in order to make this move work, they needed all the help that they could get, since both of them would have to travel significantly to get started. Just telling their parents of their long and short term plans helped them let go and invest in their new possibilities. Their parents even offered to help the children with the transition by coming to Dubai.

Thus their parents became part of the solution and unearthed new possibilities in terms of family. Consolidation involves adopting the change and leaving the old situation behind. Difficulties can arise when one has trouble letting go of their old life.

Stage 7: Living the change

In the final step of the process, one starts living the change, but it doesn't end here. This is just a new beginning. Unintended consequences can arise. For example, the choice of school might be linked to a longer term question which might arise for Amy and Jeff, whether they want to maximise the children's British identity or whether they want to maintain as international an environment for them as possible.

Mistakes and discomforts should be seen in the light of learning opportunities rather than feelings of regret, which can lead to feelings of loss and an aversion to future movement. Helping others accept the change can be half the battle, so it's important to work through the change in as

structured and considered a way as possible

Embracing complex change can be invigorating, but daunting. Aligning this process in a relationship can be exciting, but complex. The Seven C's framework has helped many executives and their families break the process down into workable parts. While sharing the process of global decision-making is not easy, understanding the impact of individual needs on the process can facilitate acceptance of a decision, clarify sources of resilience and help take the cycle of change forward. Following this framework can become the cornerstone of creating successful global lives.

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