
The Gift of a Global Cosmopolitan Mindset



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Those who live global lives develop a psyche that enables them to tackle complex challenges.

“What is it that makes me feel so comfortable, sitting in this group of people who have lived and worked all over the world? What is it about the way we think that is different and makes me feel so much a part of this group?” Jack, an American entrepreneur in Hong Kong, asked me over coffee as we were discussing global living.

People like Jack, who have worked and lived in different countries, are part of a growing club of individuals I’ve come to call Global Cosmopolitans. Despite the **backlash** against the concept of “citizen of the world”, they are still a growing population. They are often (and unfortunately) thought of as footloose global executives who call no place home. But my lifelong research into this group finds that it is not comprised of people who take life so flippantly. Many of them come from humble immigrant backgrounds, grew up in multiple countries speaking various languages and have had to work very hard to get where they are today. Some are simply from bicultural families and have been born into a world of globalisation and change.

Each of their stories is different, but what binds them together is a mindset that helps them approach the complexity they face.

Critical lessons

My latest book, *The Global Cosmopolitan Mindset*, centres on the mindset that Global Cosmopolitans develop on their journey. As Jack's questions demonstrate, this mindset is an elusive concept, even for Global Cosmopolitans themselves. But understanding it is critical for both Global Cosmopolitans and those who manage or work with them, because this mindset is essential to survive and thrive in the complex world we live in. Global Cosmopolitans are remarkably good at learning from life experiences, although they often don't realise it themselves. Their skills can provide all of us with critical lessons that can help us maximise our potential.

Based on my decades of research and interviews with hundreds of well-travelled individuals, a global cosmopolitan mindset is made up of three parts: a growth mindset, a global mindset and a creative mindset.

Global Cosmopolitans often tell me that their attitudes, such as thinking of their lives as an opportunity to learn and grow, help substantially in new situations where they have to deal with the complications of difference. On the other hand, having a rigid mindset, i.e. one that has clear rules about right and wrong, or good and bad, can help them feel secure but also limit their ability to grow. A growth mindset helps Global Cosmopolitans remain flexible and open to change. This is the base from which they are able to find creative solutions to the complications of global life and work. Having a learning orientation often kick-starts a virtuous cycle: The creativity they cultivate feeds back into their motivation to continue learning.

Finding solutions to global challenges

A global mindset is defined by the belief that both local and global orientations are needed to make sense of the world. Many people's understanding of life and work, including their attitude towards building networks and crafting solutions, has local roots. Meanwhile, Global Cosmopolitans can understand a local orientation – and often rely on it – but are globally minded. Meera, for example, grew up between the United Kingdom and India. Simultaneously living in the respective cultures of each parent gave her constant exposure to differences in both places but also roots in each one. Now an entrepreneur, she says she is never short of new

business ideas that could have global implications.

While Global Cosmopolitans often do not describe themselves as creative, they are quick to tell stories of adapting to changes in location, work and relationships and seem able to flourish in new settings. A creative mindset is characterised by curiosity, the ability to suspend judgment, tolerance of ambiguity, wonder and a belief in one's ability to find creative solutions. An international life is a fertile breeding ground for the development of a creative mindset. It makes Global Cosmopolitans more sensitive to who they are and new ways of functioning.

A growing number of researchers and leaders describe how having a global mindset is an essential aspect of successful leadership. Individuals with a global mindset are less likely to simplify the realities of today's business world. They acknowledge and address the complexity and ambiguity involved. Leading change in the current context calls for new solutions to global challenges. We can all learn from the Global Cosmopolitans' experience of this changing reality.

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