

Moving Abroad?

Don't Forget to Pack Your Brain

BY MAUREEN BRIDGET RABOTIN, GMS

What is it that makes expatriates feel like fish out of water, and what are the best ways to acclimate to new cultures and ways of life? Rabotin says that when the time comes to go on international assignment, prepare yourself physically and mentally with realistic expectations by understanding how your brain functions. This preparation, beginning with self-awareness, will put the adventure into a more positive light and put you on the path to success.

The international assignment has been confirmed. The family has agreed to join you in this new adventure. And an adventure it certainly will be. As defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, an adventure is an exciting or remarkable experience that also can include some risk-taking or danger.

I listened to one of my clients as he described the family's arrival in southern France and how leaving their small hometown in the Midwest turned out to include not only remarkable experiences, but some serious reflections on what was at risk for their two teenage boys. Our discussions focused on how best to prepare each and every family member for an expatriate assignment. This family participated in post-arrival cross-cultural training with follow-up

expatriate coaching that equipped them with the support and structure to air what could have sent them packing their suitcase, heading home, and incurring an immense expense both to the company and to themselves as they would have had to deal with a failed assignment.

What turned this family's adventure into a successful international assignment?

Moving Causes Upheaval

Arriving in a foreign country entails more than just learning the foreign language. For anyone who has moved, even to another house in the same neighborhood, you know the upheaval created by deciding what goes, what stays, and what gets thrown away. That is the physical side to moving. Then there is the emotional side to going through this pro-







cess. A nostalgic journey of trying to understand why we accumulate belongings and what they mean to us. Their monetary value often is minimal compared to their sentimental value.

When this trip down memory lane is completed, the boxes filled, labeled, and piled high for the movers, a personal journey of preparation starts a new upheaval, this time emotional. From the practical side of how to set the stage for goodbye events, closure for projects suddenly interrupted by an overseas opportunity, and family reunions with unending questions and comments—“lucky you,” “why are you leaving?” and “when can we come and visit?”—to the intangible side of why you may experience an emotional roller coaster. If this is the first international assignment, the honeymoon stage tends to be prolonged with unrealistic expectations that everything will be like it has been back home.

Good intentions by family and friends have a role in your successful transition, which should not be underestimated, starting with the importance of having family and friends visit after you have settled in. As you get your bearings, you subconsciously prepare the arrival of guests as you plan for their visit. The opportunity to play tourist once again in your new hometown increases your attention of where you are and what you would like to share with loved ones. With that as a first step in your action plan, let us take a look at what is driving the emotional tides.

Emotions are influenced by a mental state that arises in response to how one appraises a situation, the actions taken, and the reactions produced, rather than through any con-

sciously focused effort. This continuous processing of information is accompanied by physiological changes in the brain.

Returning back to our family from the Midwestern United States, their arrival in a small town in the south of France seemed to be the ideal opportunity for growth, both professionally and personally. For the assignee, his role of turning the local site around meant restructuring the company. For his wife, her dream of pursuing her earlier studies of the French language and a passion for French cuisine were definite motivators in accepting the assignment. Their sons did not necessarily share this enthusiasm as their entry into adolescence already had begun. Their life in the Midwest had everything they could hope for: the younger son, a star player on the junior high basketball team; a new girlfriend for the older son. After much persuading, the boys were convinced that the family would try it for a year, and if they were not happy after that, repatriation was always possible.

Arriving in early August and not having had a preview trip to choose housing, they had agreed to stay in a hotel until they could find appropriate accommodations. The first day at the hotel pool had the mother spinning in circles. Topless young women lounged around the pool as her teenage sons gaped in awe. For her husband, his introduction to the company structure lacked exactly that. After agreeing to attend a presentation with a new client, he was astonished to find that the executives were still writing the script to their presentation 10 minutes after the meeting should have begun. During our cross-cultural training, the recounting of these and other

episodes led us down an interesting path on how they had prepared for this journey.

A Fish Out of Water

Recent research in neuroscience amazingly is proving the true meaning of the expression, “to feel like a fish out of water.” Years of experience engrave memories in our brain of how, why, and when we do what we do. With repeated practice, constant familiar environments, and unending habits of daily life, we tend to arrive at a mindless state of existence. “Mindless” as in the opposite of mindful—that state where we execute everyday obligations without much thought as to the how, why, or when of it all. Then suddenly we find ourselves uprooted, much like this family from the Midwest.

Our brain is on alert as it tries to retrieve a sense of tranquility. A feeling of stability escapes us. What is different becomes more pronounced as we try to understand its implications in comparison to our expectations. What we believed to be acceptable ways of behaving become questionable. What we accepted as truths seems to turn out to be misled convictions. Who are we? Our identity appears to have vanished as no one recognizes who we are, where we have been, and why we seem so confused. This state can be explained by an erratic meandering of neurons building new information highways. Burrowing deep into our brain systems, they carve out new pathways to execute, stabilize, and provide for familiar patterns. This contributes to the feeling of fatigue.

During this transition period, our brain actively needs our attention. When we are jolted into seeing what surprises or shocks us, researchers in

neuroscience are now teaching us that we can train ourselves to choose our reaction.

Developing Mindfulness

By developing mindfulness, the ability to focus our attention and be extremely aware of our environment with all our senses: what we are feeling, seeing, hearing, thinking, and smelling, we increase our neuroplasticity, the adaptability of the brain neurons. From this point on, we can then choose how to regulate our emotions. One of the best strategies first described by Victor Frankl in his book, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” is today referred to as “cognitive reappraisal”—our capability to change how we think about what is happening to us. When we learn how to recognize and label the emotions surging through our body in speeds of milliseconds, “we can reinterpret the meaning of the event in a way that changes in emotional impact,” according to Dr. Kevin Ochsner in his article “Staying Cool Under Pressure: Insights from Social

Cognitive Neuroscience and Their Implications for Self and Society,” published in the February 2008 issue of the *NeuroLeadership Journal*.”

In this article, the process described enables us to understand the different stages that occur when we generate an emotion. This particular cognitive strategy—reappraisal—involves reframing or reinterpreting, adopting or accepting, normalizing, reordering, and repositioning, which can be simplified in laymen’s terms as a 4-A command process of analyzing, adjusting, aligning, and adapting. Trying to avoid or suppress initial emotions through distraction has been shown to make things worse in the long run.

When we analyze the situation, we can adjust our response, align it with what is culturally and personally acceptable, and adapt our reactions accordingly. By redirecting our initial shock of what is different through mindfulness, we modify the process, thus changing a negative judgment into a positive curiosity. How is it that this is acceptable behavior? What

shocks me and why? What do these people value that seems to contradict my subconscious values? How can I develop a perspective that is more acceptable of this situation? Can I simply choose to avoid this situation in the future?

By redirecting our emotional stress and culturally calibrating our reaction, we avoid an emotional outburst known as an “amygdala hijacking” or a reaction labeled as “going limbic” in “Your Brain at Work,” by David Rock. When the time comes to go on that international assignment, prepare yourself physically and mentally with realistic expectations by understanding how your brain functions. This preparation, starting with self-awareness, will put the adventure into a more positive, bright light as you speed ahead on the road to success, for everyone’s benefit; the company’s and the assignee’s. ■

Maureen Bridget Rabotin, GMS, is a certified global executive coach, founder of Effective Global Leadership, Paris, France, and a member of the *MOBILITY* Global Editorial Advisory Committee. She can be reached at +33 6 6354 1225 or e-mail mrabotin@egleadership.com.

