

**Cross-cultural Coaching:  
Ensuring Success Over the Life Cycle of an Expatriate Assignment**

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This paper examines the key role that professional coaching can play in ensuring the success of international assignments. A professional coach who has experience working in an international context can powerfully and effectively assist expatriates and their families in dealing with the myriad of challenges that can present themselves over the cycle of an expatriate assignment. Assessing the employee-assignment match, choosing the assignment, understanding potential cultural challenges, preparing for the move, adjusting to life in a new culture, living with fulfillment and balance, preparing for repatriation and reflecting on lessons learned are all rich areas of an expatriate experience in which a coach can make a substantive difference in the ultimate success of an international assignment. This is a win-win proposition for the expatriate and their family and their international company that has put much at stake in having their assignment be successful.

### **A Vital Expatriate Service**

In today's international marketplace, multinational companies are relying on expatriate assignments to fulfill their global business strategies (Corporate Leadership Council, April, 2002). The financial commitment to training, compensating, and relocating expatriate employees and their families is significant. The cost of a single three-year overseas assignment has been estimated to be over a million dollars (Corporate Leadership Council, June, 2002). When an expatriate assignment fails, the costs, both direct and indirect, can also be substantial, ranging from \$200,000 to \$1.2 million or more (Swaak, 1995; McNulty, 2001).

There is growing research in different global sectors, e.g., corporate, military, education, foreign service, international development, etc., that the successful adjustment of expatriates' spouses and families is highly correlated with the success of international assignments. The inability to adapt to the new culture, cope with the challenges associated with an expatriate assignment and deal with limited spousal employment opportunities have all been cited as contributing factors to failed expatriate assignments (Ely & McCormick, 1993). In developing and providing expatriate services, multinational companies have found that they cannot afford to ignore the expatriate executive's spouse and family.

Coaching, specifically for couples and their families, is increasingly being recognized as a potentially vital service for the success of expatriate assignments. Yet, this service, that could address the very heart of an expatriate families' adjustment, is often found missing in many programs of expatriate services. Given the scope of the investment and the fact that the success of an expatriate assignment seems to be so heavily dependent on the expatriate's spousal or family relationships, cross-cultural coaching for expatriates and their families should be made

available in every international program of expatriate services and during every phase in the life cycle of an expatriate assignment (Miser & Miser, 2009).

It is safe to assume that most expatriates and their families want to be successful in their life in their new country. No matter how much preparation or training they have prior to their move, however, expatriate will not know what life will bring until they have taken the bold step and moved abroad. It is only after relocating, with everything at stake, when expatriates find out what is really required to live in a foreign land. International businesses make a sound investment in the success of expatriate assignments and, ultimately, in the future of their business enterprises internationally when they offer cross-cultural coaching more centrally in their expatriate program of services (Miser & Miser, 2009).

## **Cross-cultural Coaching Services**

### ***What is Coaching?***

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), the professional association that oversees the training and credentialing of coaches worldwide defines coaching in the following way:

Coaching is an ongoing relationship, which focuses on clients taking action toward the realization of their visions, goals or desires. Coaching uses a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build the client's level of awareness and responsibility and provides the client with structure, support and feedback. The coaching process helps clients both define and achieve professional and personal goals faster and with more ease than would be possible otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

Other professionals have defined coaching as a powerful relationship for people making important changes in their lives, designing their future, and taking committed action to realize their visions and goals (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998; Williams & Davis, 2002). Coaches hold their clients as naturally capable and able, as whole and complete, and as creative and resourceful in tackling life's challenges as they work together to co-create and fulfill the vision they have for their lives (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998).

### ***Coaching Services for Expatriates and their Families***

Cross-cultural coaching services include a coaching relationship with a professionally trained certified coach who has experience working with expatriate assignees, their spouses and their families. The coach is also someone with cross-cultural expertise and international experience and who can understand the real life issues that the expatriate assignees and their families are experiencing. Coaching generally is for people, like expatriates couples and their families, who have big commitments in life, are facing large challenges and are making significant transitions in their lives.

Professional coaching is an ongoing relationship for individuals and/or couples who are committed to producing extraordinary results in their lives, in their relationships, in their careers and in their communities. In partnership with their coach, expatriates co-create a safe, supportive and confidential relationship. In each coaching session, the expatriate individual or expatriate

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<sup>1</sup> [www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)

couple, is able to choose the focus of the conversation. The professional coach is trained to listen powerfully and to contribute observations and questions to help the expatriate and their family gain clarity and awareness of what's going on in their lives.

Coaching provides expatriates a rich opportunity to explore their values and what is important to them, what they are passionate about, what they are concerned about, and what kind of life they envision together in their new host country. Through a conversation with a professional coach, expatriates are able to enhance the quality of their lives, achieve their personal and career goals and be supported in living passionate, balanced and fulfilling lives.

### ***Why is Coaching Ideal?***

The field of professional coaching, including couple's coaching, is ideally suited to assist expatriate assignee, their partner and family in meeting the challenges of expatriate living. A coaching relationship can be viewed as flexible and responsive resource that can be available to an expatriate couple, as needed, over the course of an expatriate assignment. Expatriates can choose to contract with a professional coach who is from their home country and who speaks their own language and the coaching itself can be done in their home, at an agreed upon location or over the telephone.

Professional coaching also allows expatriates to achieve desired outcomes in relatively short periods of time (two to six months) and can be far less stigmatizing and more "user friendly" than traditional mental health services with which the couple may not be familiar in their host country. A trained certified coach can spot situations in which expatriates may be experiencing more intense problems that are outside the coach's professional capabilities and can assist them in seeking therapeutic help within the local community. More importantly, a certified coach is someone who is professionally trained and understands the importance of confidentiality. It is recommended that a coach working with expatriate couples and their families has experience working in families systems, and, ideally, has cross-cultural experience living as an expatriate in a foreign country.

### ***Assessing Marital and Family Readiness and Supporting the Couple's Choice***

1. *Assessing expatriate assignee - assignment match and assessing marital and family readiness.* A good match between the prospective expatriate assignee and the expatriate assignment being offered and the readiness of the potential assignee and their family to make such a bold choice to live and work in a foreign country can be critical to a company's return on their investment.
  - *Assessing expatriate assignee - assignment match.* A coach can assist the potential expatriate assignee understand the intention and job description of the expatriate assignment and consider whether he or she is qualified and the right candidate for the position that is being offered. What is the expatriate's personal motivation for taking the assignment? Are there health, financial or other questions that might place the expatriate candidate at risk for success in the expatriate assignment? An on-line instrument that can be used for this assessment is the Intercultural Readiness Assessment (Dodd, 2008).
  - *Understanding the scope of the international assignment.* A coach can assist the couple in talking about the terms of the expatriate assignment package that is being offered,

- including the relocation services, housing, education, tax services and family support. A coach can help an expatriate couple to clarify all their questions and concerns as they consider choosing an expatriate assignment.
- *Assessing assignee, marital and family motivation and readiness for accepting an expatriate assignment.* Additionally, a coach can work with the expatriate assignee and his or her spouse and family to help them understand their readiness for an international assignment. Couples can utilize a coaching relationship to clarify their reasons for exploring an expatriate assignment and formulate the concerns they have around taking such a bold step in their lives. What is drawing the couple to consider an expatriate assignment at this point in their lives?
2. *Clarifying and making the choice to accept an expatriate assignment or not.* The choice to accept or to decline an offer of an expatriate assignment is one of the most important discussions an expatriate and their spouse can have with a professional coach.
- *Creating partnership.* Couples can use couple's coaching as a forum for talking about the life they wish to create for themselves and for their family and determining whether an expatriate assignment is right for them. It is important that couples create an effective partnership around evaluating and choosing an expatriate assignment.
  - *Connecting with values.* When exploring an expatriate assignment, couples can clarify what is important, what they value and what they find compelling about the assignment. A coach can also encourage the couple to pull back from their immediate circumstances to examine an assignment from a meta-view. What is calling to them and what possibilities might an expatriate assignment provide themselves and their family?
  - *Making the choice.* Powerfully making the choice together requires a couple to fully consider all the "pros" and "cons" for both accepting a potential expatriate assignment and declining the opportunity. After such a discussion, the couple can be better able to deal with the myriad of logistical, financial, and emotional aspects of the assignment that arise should they choose to accept the expatriate assignment.

### ***Cross-cultural Orientation***

In preparation for their expatriate assignment, the expatriate assignee, spouse and family may participate in a one- or two-day cross-cultural orientation either just prior to their departure or just after their arrival in their host country. The orientation is designed to help the whole family in understanding the cultural differences between their home country and their host country. The family will also be able to learn about what they can expect in terms of their cultural adjustment to life in their host country. More specifically, the cross-cultural orientation focuses on the following areas:

- *Understanding cultural differences.* Family members explore cultural differences between their home and host countries in the areas of societal values, communication styles, habits of daily living, social norms and expectations, and behavioral norms of the workplace.
- *Understanding life in the host country.* Family members learn about the new country's history, geography, political system, industries, social issues, arts, natural resources and

current events. They discuss how this information may impact their daily life in their host country.

- *Managing the challenges of moving and adjusting to life to a new country.* The family learns about the stages of cultural adjustment and what they can expect over life cycle of an expatriate assignment. They are able to talk about some of the typical dilemmas that expatriate face living in a new country and what they can do to enhance their cultural adjustment and family resiliency.
- *Assessing individual and family needs prior to the move.* Family members have an opportunity to explore what they need to get ready for their expatriate assignment. These needs may range from saying goodbye to friends and family, to establishing new connections in their host country and from what needs to be done to get ready logistically for the move to understanding what to expect when they arrive in their host country.

### ***Coaching during the Life Cycle of an Expatriate Assignment***

A professional coach can be available to an expatriate, their spouse and family during the life cycle of an expatriate assignment to ensure their success in their personal and professional lives. This service can be contracted in such a way that an expatriate can request coaching as needed at different points in their expatriate assignment. Specifically, as the family gets ready to move, a coach can be invaluable in helping the couple in developing a partnership around handling all the logistical matters associated with their relocation. Once the expatriate assignee and their family is on the ground in the new country, a coach can be available to them for problem-solving, adjusting to the cultural norms of their new country, and taking a longer view as they settle into their new life. When their assignment draws to a close, a coach can be available to the assignee and their family once again in planning for their move home or to a new destination and in having a successful repatriation experience.

1. *Preparing to Launch (In the 6 months prior to departure).* When an expatriate and their spouse choose to accept an international assignment, their worldview shifts dramatically. A whole host of logistical issues and decisions will flow from their fateful choice. After the choice is made, the periods before and just after their international move represent times of mixed emotions, intense problem solving, intentional planning and committed action for the expatriate couple.
  - *Creating an aligned vision for the future.* A couple's coach can assist a couple in creating an aligned vision of their future and in considering all the logistics that they will need to attend to once they have chosen to embark on an expatriate assignment.
  - *Working as a team.* A coach can assist the couple working as a team during this time of significant change. Accepting an expatriate assignment requires fact-finding, brainstorming, planning, communicating with other family members and making important choices and decisions.
  - *Designing a project supporting their family's transition.* A coach can work with the expatriate and their spouse in creating a project that involves not only the logistics of the relocation, but also the transition issues for each member of the family. A coach can help the couple include their children in preparing for their move to a new country.

2. *Co-creating a New Life in a Foreign Land (in the first 3 months of arrival).* In the first months of an international assignment, expatriates come to realize what Dorothy of the Wizard of Oz experienced when she landed in the Land of Oz. Dorothy exclaimed, “Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore!” This is a time of novelty, excitement and a significant change in daily life.
  - *Reflecting on and learning from the initial cultural adjustment.* A coach can assist a new expatriate couple and their family in articulating what is happening and gaining insight into their adjustment during the months after their move.
  - *Exploring the new culture.* During this early phase, expatriates and their families can experience a sense of excitement that is often referred to as the honeymoon phase of an expatriate assignment (Copeland, 2009). A coach can assist expatriate in exploring and enjoying the cultural gifts of their new country, while avoiding the tendency to adopt negative or disempowering viewpoints about their host and/or home country’s challenges as they naturally compare life in both countries.
  - *Facilitating problem solving.* A couple can get support in adjusting their roles and responsibilities, keeping focused on short-term goals, identifying roadblocks and obstacles, and working together to solve problems. Couples can learn ways to notice disempowering viewpoints and create empowering perspectives as the “rubber” begins to meet the “road.”
  
3. *Adjusting to the New Culture (in the 3 to 12 months after arrival).* This is often a period of maximum cultural shock for an expatriate, their spouse and their children (Copeland, 2009). Expatriates begin to have increased difficulty in coping with the daily stresses of adjusting to life in their new country and experience a range of symptoms, ranging from homesickness, boredom and irritability to disruptions in sleep patterns and increased feelings of sadness and anxiety.
  - *Dealing with culture shock.* A coach can help expatriates recognize and normalize their experience of culture shock at this time and, in addition, develop strategies to reduce stress and gain some perspective during this most difficult time of adjustment. A trained certified coach can also spot situations in which a couple or other family members may be experiencing more intense problems that are outside the professional capabilities of the coach and can assist the expatriate in seeking therapeutic help within the local community.
  - *Connecting with local resources and the expatriate community.* A coach can assist the expatriate in fulfilling their goals by accessing a whole host of local opportunities from local fitness centers, travel services, and health food stores to museums and shopping establishments. Expanding their connection with the wider expatriate community through participating in expatriate clubs and other resources can be key for expatriates as they adjust to life in a new country.
  - *Staying connected with friends and family.* Although the expatriate may be a long way from home, staying connected to family, friends and other networks of support can be critical to maintaining a sense of balance and connection in this time of emotional turbulence. A coach can assist the expatriate and their family members to identify those key community and social networks they have already established in their live and to

design a plan to stay connected through the myriad of social media technology that is available on the internet and in today's global communication systems.

4. *On the Ground in a Foreign Country (in the second and subsequent years after arrival).* By the end of the first year after arriving in their host country, a couple and their family have typically settled into their new life and can now look more easily and further into the future. The next few years of their expatriate assignment will be a continuous accommodation and integration to their new culture (Copeland, 2009).
  - *Creating a longer-term view for their expatriate experience.* At the six-month point, an expatriate couple can benefit from taking a step back and taking a longer-term view of their future. What do they see for themselves three to five years down the road? What kind of work or activities will they each be engaged in? What will their children be doing?
  - *Planning and fulfilling family projects.* With a coach, a couple is able to assess local opportunities, create projects, make plans and take committed action. Traveling, going on sightseeing excursions, volunteering, building a new social network, finding a job, or building a business are all projects that require planning, problem solving and taking action.
  - *Reflecting on the expatriate experience.* In a coaching relationship, a couple can gain insight and awareness of themselves through inquiry, self-reflection and shared learning. The coach is trained to ask powerful questions to help the couple in integrating the lessons they are learning in their new host country.
5. *Co-creating a New Life Once More, Completing Expatriation, and Coming Home (in the three months prior and three months after repatriation).* At the end of an expatriate assignment, a couple can use a coach to integrate their expatriate experience and to facilitate their transition home.
  - *Re-examining their values.* At the completion of an expatriate assignment, expatriates come full circle as they look forward to their journey home or to their next expatriate destination. A coach can help an expatriate and their family members share about what has been important to them and to be anchored in what they value as they prepare for their new future.
  - *Creating alignment around a new vision for the future.* A couple's coach can assist a couple in creating an aligned vision of their future and considering all the challenges they will face as they prepare for their move home or to another expatriate assignment.
  - *Developing a project supporting their family's transition.* A coach can work with the couple in creating a project that involves not only handling the logistics of the repatriation, but also resolving the transition issues for each member of the family. A coach can help the couple include their family members and their children in preparing for their move home or to another expatriate assignment.

## ***Debriefing the Cross-cultural Experience***

At the completion of their expatriate assignment, the expatriate assignee, spouse and family participate in a one-day completion and debriefing either just prior to their departure or just after their arrival in their home country (or their new host country). This family debriefing is designed to help the whole family in coming to terms with the benefits and the drawbacks of their expatriate experience. Fully acknowledging the lessons learned, the international friendships gained, and the memories captured can facilitate a smoother transition for the couple and their family.

- *Understanding the challenges and stages of adjustment of repatriation.* The family has the opportunity to learn about some of the dilemmas and challenges they may face as they return home or as they move to a new country. They examine the stages of adjustment in the light of their new plans for their future.
- *Understanding one's own growth, personal development and life lessons learned.* Each member of the family has the opportunity to reflect on what they learned about themselves and life in their expatriation experience as well as how they grew and developed emotionally, socially and culturally during their expatriate assignment.
- *Completing the expatriate experience.* Each family member is able to reflect on what is completing in their life as the expatriate experience is coming to a close and what is opening up in their life at the same time. They have an opportunity to share about key international experiences that have helped shape their lives and about what they want to leave behind and what they want to take with them as they move forward in their lives.
- *Building a new life after repatriation.* Family members have an opportunity to think and talk about the future they are not creating for themselves, to talk about what they need, what they want to do, and what support they need. They share about concrete plans and projects to take action in building their new life after their expatriate assignment has come to a close.

## **Summary**

This paper has examined the role that professional coaching can play in ensuring the success of international assignments for expatriates and their families and for the international companies that hire them. Viewed as a flexible, adaptive and responsive service, professional coaching, including couple's coaching, is uniquely designed to assist an expatriate assignee, their partner and family in meeting the challenges of expatriate living. When coaching is built into a program of expatriate services, the service can be made available and be requested by the expatriate to meet their needs on a timely and time-limited basis. A professional coach who has experience working in an international context can powerfully and effectively assist expatriates and their families in dealing with the myriad of challenges that can present themselves over the cycle of an expatriate assignment. Assessing the employee-assignment match, choosing the assignment, understanding potential cultural challenges, preparing for the move, adjusting to life in a new culture, living with fulfillment and balance, preparing for repatriation and reflecting on lessons learned are all important parts of an expatriate experience where a coach can make a substantive difference in the ultimate success of an international assignment. This is a win-win proposition for the expatriate and their family and for their international company that has put much at stake in having expatriate assignments help to fulfill their business strategies globally.

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