

ONWARD!: *Training the Perpetual Expatriate*

by Dean Foster

Peter & Jacqueline Carter, and their three children, made their first international relocation from upstate New York to Paris in 1999. Jacqueline was then a senior manager at a large multinational, and when her company offered her an international assignment in Paris for three years, she knew it would be a great professional move, but had serious concerns about the implications such a move would have for her husband and their children. Wisely, her company's HR department arranged for the Carter's to attend a cross-cultural orientation prior to their departure, which, in addition to providing important information about the social and business requirements for succeeding in France, also provided the Carter's with the opportunity to explore their own private concerns and questions in regard to the impact that living and working in France would have on each member of the family. By the end of the training, the Carter's felt they were fully prepared for a new and exciting adventure in France, and, in fact, after three years in Paris, had developed a love affair for their new home, new neighbors, and new country. Most importantly for Jacqueline's employer, she had succeeded masterfully on her assignment in France, so much so, in fact, that the company has just asked Jacqueline if she would repeat her success in Singapore. Yes, move the family, again, this time to Asia.

The Perpetual Expatriate

For a number of reasons, many first-time expatriates choose to expatriate again at the end of their first assignment abroad, rather than return home (returning home being, for most of them, their initial intention when they

first began their assignment). Many repeat this pattern again after the second assignment as well, and perhaps again, and yet again. In fact, the number of “perpetual” expatriates seems to be on the rise, as the end of the first and second wave of corporate expatriates on traditional two-to-four year assignments approaches. Often the reasons are complex: an ambivalent mix of concerns and feelings about returning “home”, going back to a job and a place which may no longer be familiar or satisfying, an unexpected comfort – even affection – for new friends and country, as memories and relationships “back home” have faded, and an appreciation for the challenge of living and working internationally. Sometimes the reasons are more prosaic: the company simply does not have a position “back home” which values the new skills that the assignee has developed, skills which can be better applied in yet another foreign location. In this case, the wise employer offers another opportunity abroad. Sometimes, (and this happens far more frequently, unfortunately), the employee simply takes another assignment abroad...with another company, rather than return home. With the investment being well over a million dollars per family per average international assignment, the employer has a vested interest in retaining the global talent of the company, and of making sure that the international assignee stays with the company at the end of their first assignment. Re-assigning them to another foreign location often mitigates the problems of repatriation and avoids the risk of losing re-patriates to a risky return process; however, does merely assigning the so-inclined and soon-to-return expatriate to another location abroad insure a second or third successful international assignment? Just as adequate preparation for the first assignment is usually necessary in order to insure success, what kind of preparation and training should the “onward” employee and family receive,

in order to insure that they succeed on their second, and third, and sometimes, fourth assignment abroad?

Expatriating ... Again?

All too often, the assumption is that since the expatriate and family already succeeded in their first international assignment (with or without formal preparation training), their success obviates the need for any formal training prior to their “onward” move. Certainly this is the thinking in the case where the family received no training prior to their first move, yet managed somehow to succeed in their first transition abroad; unfortunately, it also remains the prevailing thinking (at least in many organizations) for those families who did receive training prior to their first move, as well, the thinking being something like this: the cross-cultural training the family received prior to their first move gave them everything they needed to know about how to transition to international life and work, and the success of their first move proves they mastered these skills; therefore, with such experienced international expatriates, there really is no need for any further preparation training with their subsequent onward moves. The assumption couldn't be more wrong.

Most experienced expatriates and their families will tell you that if there was one thing they learned both in their formal pre-departure cross-cultural training and in their on-the-ground life and work experiences as expatriates abroad, it is that the cultural (and sometimes language) issues were typically significantly more challenging than what they had first expected. When DFA, as providers of cross-cultural training, offer pre-departure cross-cultural training to expatriates who have been authorized for the service by their sponsoring organizations, we can almost 100% of the

time guarantee that expatriates who have already completed at least one assignment abroad (regardless of the location), will actively seek to arrange their cross-cultural training for themselves and their family prior to their “onward” move to yet a second or third location; when we have difficulties getting authorized assignees and families to actually commit to a cross-cultural training, it is almost always with families on their first-time move. This indicates that ignorance of the critical adjustment issues associated with crossing cultures is fairly high among first time assignees, but that once an assignment has occurred, awareness of the need for and importance of formal cross-cultural training is high among “onward” assignees and families. Curiously, the high awareness for cross-cultural training among “onward” assignees is often not met with a similar level of awareness on the part of the sponsoring HR department: many organizations incorrectly assume the onward assignee doesn’t need any further cross-cultural training and support in advance of their onward assignment. While the first assignment heightens the awareness of the need for the assignee for further cross-cultural training in preparation for their onward move, it often serves as a justification for the company for not providing future cross-cultural training in advance of the onward move. It is never a good situation for the employer and employee to be working at cross-purposes, especially when the need for support is as critical the second, third or fourth (and for that matter, for each subsequent assignment, regardless of how many there are) international assignment as it was valuable for the first.

Needed... but Different

While the process of moving may be the same, independent of the cultures involved, and the type of problems and challenges therefore simply repeated

with each successive move, two things are remarkably different each time: the cultures are different (and the information one needs to know about the daily life and work culture of their new country can be formidable), and the life and professional situation of the assignee and family members is probably going to change, each time, as well. While it might be true that there really isn't much of a need to introduce a family who has already successfully made an international move (and who may have already had this kind of information in their first formal pre-departure cross-cultural training workshop) to information about adjustment and adaptation to the processes of international assignment, it is important to refresh their memory of the ups and downs of this process, and have them reflect on the validity and importance of understanding the issues associated with international assignment, such as culture-shock, family adjustment, etc. It is never a bad idea to afford the onward family the opportunity to reflect on this information again, especially in light of their real-life experience as having successfully maneuvered the shoals of international assignment number one.

Leveraging the First International Experience to the Advantage of the Second

Most importantly, however, is the need the assignee and family may have to reflect on how they themselves may have changed now that they have gone through their first international experience, and how these changes may help them in preparing for their next, onward, expatriation. This is important for both expatriates who had received formal training prior to their first move, as well as for those who received no formal training at any point. However, if the assignee and family did not receive formal cross-cultural training prior to their previous assignment, affording them the opportunity to

systematically reflect, in a structured and guided format, on their adjustment, warts and all, can help considerably toward insuring the success of the next assignment. We know that formal cross-cultural training helps reduce failure rates on international assignments substantially; having a successful first assignment without any formal, structured understanding of why or how it was successful, provides no insurance that the next assignment will succeed; systematically reflecting on the causes of the success (and the bumps and difficulties, as well) of the first assignment, through a guided, structured, and formal cross-cultural training program, in preparation for the onward assignment, can leverage the first assignment experience to the benefit of the second, insuring a smoother and more successful transition onward. As might have been the case with the first, not providing this opportunity risks the million dollar assignment, only this time, second time around.

When In Rome....

And the information one needs to have about life and work with Romans is simply different from the information one needs to succeed day-to-day in Shanghai. Knowing (whether attained through formal pre-departure training or through the more difficult and risky on-the-ground school-of-hard-knocks) the questions one needs answered when on international assignment, still does not provide the country-specific (and most-importantly, city-specific) answers that will insure success for the assignee and family. This information is best presented in an efficient and structured manner, through a cross-cultural program that both presents the essential questions and provides the critical answers for successful life and work in the new country, prior to the move there, eliminating the costly and

dangerous on-the-ground learning curve, and maximizing return-on-investment almost immediately. Knowing how to do business with Romans in Rome, all the issues, all the intricate topics, as well as where to get the kids' clothes and how to find the kind of food they like in the neighborhood in Rome where one happens to live, can only be provided objectively and accurately (no colored war stories from jaded expats already on assignment, please!) in a cross-cultural program specific to, of course, Italy and Rome. And if that's where the onward assignment happens to be, no previous cross-cultural program, say, on Sao Paulo, will do.

So How is Onward Training Different?

If we recognize the need for cross-cultural training prior to each onward assignment, we also need to recognize how the training itself must be modified from the traditional cross-cultural training usually administered prior to a first-time international assignment. For one thing, we need to assess whether or not the onward assignees have ever received any formal cross-cultural training in advance of their first assignment. If they did not, providing the information about adjusting to the international assignment, using their first assignment as grist for the discussion, will be important, as it will be their first opportunity, albeit looking back, to formally explore the issues and experiences they went through. This will give them the necessary framework for considering what lies ahead in preparation for their next assignment. For those assignees and families who had received formal training prior to their first assignment, the program in anticipation of their onward move should help them to organize their reflections on their first expatriate experience, and in a guided fashion, help them to build the framework necessary for thinking about what they will need to do in

preparation for their onward move. Once this groundwork has been established, for both kinds of expatriates, a thorough exploration of the culture to which they will be onward relocating is critical. As may or may not have been done the first time, reviewing essentials such as values, history, background, people, language, politics, economics, demographics, school systems, daily life, work habits, negotiation, managing, the worlds of men and women, children and adults, socializing, making friends, dealing with conflict and differences, etc., all need to be explored, this time, specific to the culture to which they will be moving. The difference in this onward program on these issues is, of course, that we reflect on these topics, not as they need to be understood by individuals from their first culture, but now as they need to be understood by individuals who are already bi-cultural (that is, changed, culturally, by their first experience). This is precisely what makes these culture-topic discussions different in an onward program from similar discussions in a first-time cross-cultural program.

Who Benefits?

As is the case with first-time cross-cultural training programs, every stakeholder in the international relocation process needs to be involved in some way in the program: this means that all family members who are relocating need to attend a component of the “onward” program that is specific to their issues, including the “trailing” partner and the children, as well as the assignee themselves. But it also means that the organization itself, with its need for rapid and measurable return-on-investment, and a dependable insurance against a failed international assignment, needs to have an onward cross-cultural training program that it can rely on. This means a program that is not merely a repeat, in design and intent, of a first-

time cross-cultural program, but a program unique to the onward experience, that leverages the first-time experience to the benefit of the next-time experience, and which provides the essential and critical information for onward success, with consideration for whether or not the assignee and family had received similar training their first time out. Cross-cultural programs that do not make these specific accommodations to the onward experience do the assignees, their families, and their sponsoring organizations a disservice, and not providing onward cross-cultural training to “perpetual” expatriates, undermines them in their efforts to do the best possible job for the organizations that sponsor them. For their success, and the global success of the organization, providing onward-specific support is nothing less than fundamental.