

Managing the Challenges of Relocation

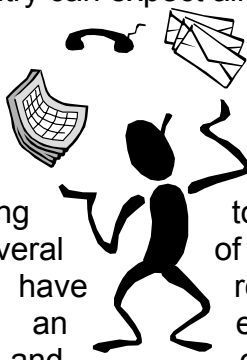
Change alone is unchanging.

- Heraclitus

Introduction

A famous study measures the amount of stress caused by several dozen common life events. Relocation ranks third in intensity, following on the heels of the death of a close relative and divorce.

America has always been a country on the move. Still, few Americans would deny that **MOVING IS STRESSFUL:**

- Its **hard work**—selling a house, securing housing in the new location, packing and transporting family goods and the endless necessary tasks of "settling in."
- **The children**, whether eight or eighteen, need extra attention.
- It is a time of saying **goodbye** to friends and to familiar and beloved places.
- The entire family needs to adjust to all the differences in the new location. Families moving to another country can expect almost everything to be different.
- Nearly every aspect of routines, schools, even the physical  common **family life changes**: daily community associations, friendships, landscape.

Families that are relocating particularly affected by several and relocation managers have transfer that enhances an traumatize his/her spouse and employees think extra hard about foreign assignments and companies have reacted to this by providing expatriate families with more help and support making the adjustment to another, possibly alien, culture.

to another country for two or three years are of these stress triggers. Human Resource recently recognized that an out-of-country employee's career advancement can nearly children. Family concerns are making the adjustment to another, possibly alien, culture.

Repatriating families have also begun to raise their voices in protest of any assumption that coming home is like putting on an old and perfectly fitting glove. Even when the

surroundings are familiar, returning to them after several years of being in a foreign country is likely to be a jolt. And this does not even take into account the changes that the repatriates themselves have undergone.

So the stress afflicting family members in domestic relocation is a concern for both expatriates and repatriates. The feelings are the same—**anxiety, depression, anger, sadness**—and they may even seem more frighteningly. These are the feelings of stress that come together and create what we call **culture shock**.

There is considerable misunderstanding about culture shock. It is not caused, only triggered, by an external incident or situation. It is the feelings about these events and situations that cause culture shock. Culture shock is manufactured and felt by how we react to the change of living in a foreign culture for an extended period of time. Let's accept it—some stress is normal. But stress that partly or fully incapacitates us needs another look.

Change and Transition

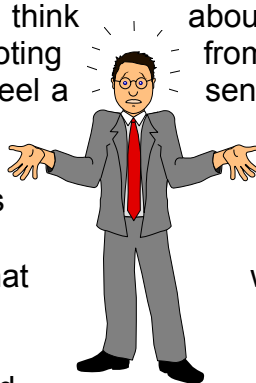
William Bridges, an organization psychologist, observes that most people react to change by navigating their way through **three distinct stages-- Endings, the Neutral Zone and New Beginnings**. People achieve successful transitions when they adjust to change through the healthy navigation of each of these three transition stages. When we fail to accomplish the essential tasks of each stage, we can get stuck in an incomplete and unsatisfying transition. This failure cripples our ability to live a satisfying life in our new area.

Endings

Our reaction to change always begins with the Ending. The Ending phase typically begins when we first learn about an impending move.

Right away we begin to think about everything we must do to complete the logistical challenges of uprooting from one place and settling in another. At the same time, we typically feel a sense of loss about the life we are leaving behind. The prospect of this loss can trigger a period of grief, as though we are preparing to lose a person close to us. The experience of grief includes several emotions:

- **Shock** - "I can't believe that we have to move just as we were getting to like it here."
- **Anger** - "I am just sick and tired of moving and I can't imagine doing it **again**."



- **Anxiety** - "I don't know how I am going to get everything ready."
- **Sadness** - "I am going to miss _____ (people, places, activities, events)."
- **Fear** - "I am used to the people in California. How am I going to get along with those easterners from Massachusetts?!"
- **Confusion and disorientation**- "I always feel awkward, on edge." (Expatriating employees and spouses are especially vulnerable.)

These feelings are uncomfortable, even painful, but also normal. Emotions are not negative in themselves, only in how they can affect us when we either ignore them or cling on to them past their natural life. Feeling anger and sadness does not mean that there is something wrong with us or with the move. Life as it is, even good life, often produces uncomfortable feelings. We don't need to run from these feelings, but to learn from them.

How do we do this? We may instinctively fear that if we acknowledge and articulate painful emotions, it will give them more power. Quite the contrary. By discussing our feelings with others we dilute their power, put them in a larger perspective and soften their negative impact.

So, a basic rule for managing change is to let ourselves feel what we feel and to discuss our feelings with people we trust.

Children are no different from adults on this score. They adjust best to relocation when they can both talk about their worries and participate in the practicalities of moving. Children of all ages feel the strain of moving and any child old enough to talk about it will benefit from doing so. Families that talk together about the ending phase of relocation make a smoother transition to their new home and environment.

Rituals are valuable ways for both adults and children to mark the significance of transitions and say good-bye to a part of their life that is ending. These parting rituals don't have to be fancy—a last visit to a favorite pizza parlor, a romp at the local playground, visits to important sites like schools, and special good-bye time with friends are examples of simple, but effective, leave-taking rituals. Some children host a goodbye party for their friends a week or two before the move.

In the case of moving, what is good for adults. Here are several tips for your transition.



for children is also healthy for "closure" at the **Ending** stage of

- Before the move, take the time to say good-bye to people and places. It gives us a sense of rounding off, of completion, and allows time to acknowledge what we will miss. Keep a journal of your experiences while living abroad.

- Encourage open communication among family members. Inform children about the move as soon as possible. When feasible, include children in some aspects of the decision-making process about how the move will be organized. Encourage everybody to speak honestly about their reactions and explore your new surroundings.
- Take time to relax and have fun. Inaugurate life in your new home or apartment with a special “Welcome to Us” dinner. Try to learn the new language.
- Pre-relocation visits to the new area help both adults and children to make the transition. Instead of wondering about the unknown, we can begin preparing ourselves while still in our old location.
- Relocation is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. This is not the best time to abandon your normal routines of self-care in the areas of sleep, nutrition and exercise.
- Have reasonable expectations of yourself and others. Recognize that relocation is inherently stressful and do not be hard on yourself for not handling everything perfectly.
- These suggestions apply as much to expatriating and repatriating relocaters as they do to those who move domestically, though pre-relocation visits are difficult to arrange for obvious reasons.
- Don't hesitate to ask for help. Well, you can hesitate, but do it anyway. Don't confuse asking for help with self-pity or weakness. And remember that most people like to help. Expatriates report that it is valuable to arrive equipped with the contact information for other expatriates from their own country. Network, network and network, some more!
- Keep your sense of humor. If you have never had one, try to develop it.

**One change leaves the way open
for the introduction of others.**

-Niccolo Machiavelli

The Neutral Zone

The Neutral Zone occupies the middle stage of transition; it begins with the departure from the old home and extends into the initial period of resettlement. Its duration varies anywhere from two or three months to nine months.

The Neutral Zone is often marked by a sense of dislocation and anxiety. Change means heading into unfamiliar territory, and during this passage it is common to confront a feeling of emptiness. People often feel in limbo; they miss their familiar surroundings but have not yet planted firm roots in the new area. During this period family members are especially vulnerable to disappointment as they find that their new location does not offer the same features, attractions and apparent advantages they had appreciated “back home.”

Despite its unsettling aspects, the Neutral Zone also provides time for rejuvenation, self-examination and redirected focus. In the Neutral Zone people discover new talents and passions, and a capacity for closer, more rewarding relationships.

People moving from one country to another may be cheated out of their neutral zone, depending on how marked the differences are between the two. The culture shock that accompanies moving to a foreign country can turn into an ongoing culture adjustment. There are many stages of culture shock; from the pre-departure phase to the honeymoon period onto intense culture shock and finally, recovery and adjustment which is just before repatriation.

One expert on change has remarked that it is an interlude that deserves to be "savored." Here are several suggestions for making your Neutral Zone a "tasty" one:

- Accept what is. Waging a war against circumstances that are fixed is self-destructive and wastes enormous energy.
- Accept your feelings for what they are. Anger and sadness aren't negative feelings unless you do not acknowledge them or realize you have them.
- Relocations disrupt the customary routines that give our lives structure, so it may help to quickly reestablish routines that provide a sense of order and structure.
- Being in Neutral for a while is normal. It is a resting time between the rigors of departure on one end and getting newly settled and established at the other.

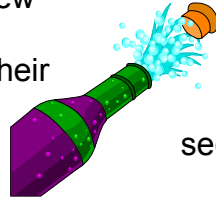
The main danger of the neutral zone is that of getting stuck. How do you know if you have gotten stuck? The two most common signs of an unsuccessful transition are emotions that are unusually intense or prolonged. If you are incapacitated by anxiety before the move or mourning the old homestead a year after relocating, it may be time to seek professional help.

Beginnings

Veteran movers learn that the unpacking of their belongings scarcely concludes their relocation. Experience teaches them that it takes six to nine months to fully acclimate to their new world.

So it can be difficult to pinpoint where the Neutral Zone merges into New Beginnings. But at some point people look back and realize that they have made the shift. Families that have successfully relocated report that the key to making a healthy transition is to quickly form connections in the new community.

- ❖ They make an effort to meet their new neighbors.
- ❖ If they are religious, they seek a spiritual home within a month of moving.



- ❖ They join one or two community groups or voluntary associations—the library guild, rescue squad, municipal health commission, hospital volunteer corps, town recreation program, planning board and Rotary are but a few of the possibilities. People who are in a new country have a special challenge. At the beginning, especially, everything can feel intimidated. Veterans of foreign moves advise that new arrivals need to get plentiful and accurate information about their host culture and immediate surroundings so that they are not constrained by their apprehension.

In other words, successful movers quickly establish relationships in their new area.

The Challenge of Change

Change is difficult. Changes in external circumstances often demand and call for internal changes. We are faced with having to let go of our familiar sources of security and self-definition.

People who have made successful relocations tend to share a number of common traits. They:

- Are intentional about setting goals and organizing their actions around these goals. They are clear, with themselves and with others, about their important values.
- Neither deny nor wallow in their emotions, but accept them for what they are and work from there. Meanwhile, they keep their sense of humor.
- Communicate their feelings openly and listen sympathetically to the feeling of others.
- Focus on their own behavior instead of trying to control the behavior of others.
- Take responsibility for themselves and are open to personal change. They know the futility of procrastination and self-pity.
- Practice flexibility and tolerance of others.

People who manage change well are those who can make and accept changes in themselves. When a major change such as relocation appears on the horizon, they are not immune from normal feelings like fear, sadness and anger. But by facing and expressing these feelings, they move toward the future with hope and a sense of adventure.

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