

What Cross-cultural workers Ought to Know about Uncompleted Transitions

Talking about her director, a cross-cultural worker said, “He has never lived on the field for more than a few weeks at a time. Even when he is here over a summer, he’s back and forth on weekends shuttling groups.”

She continued, “One thing that is adding to my problem is the fact that we seem to travel back and forth to the USA about every two-three months ourselves—so we never quite get used to one thing when we are doing an entry/re-entry type of thing.”

Though these comments could be said about many cross-cultural workers today, they would have rarely been said before the latter half of the twentieth century, and never said at the beginning of it. Earlier cross-cultural workers simply did not change cultures as frequently, so they got used to things and felt at home wherever they were.

Changes have occurred during the last couple of centuries that have led to many uncompleted transitions, to people changing cultures not knowing whether they are both coming or going—because they are coming AND going. Some of the changes have affected those serving cross-culturally.

A Transition Model

An intuitive model of what happens between people being fully involved in one culture and their being fully involved in another is that there are three stages.

- **Leaving.** The leaving stage begins when people first seriously consider leaving where they are, and it ends when they actually walk out the door on their way. Leaving often takes several months and sometimes years.
- **In Transit.** The transit stage of reentry begins when they leave their houses in one culture, and it ends when they unpack their minds, not just their suitcases, in the new culture. It may last only a few hours or days, but it may also last several weeks or even longer.
- **Entering.** The entering stage begins when their minds are unpacked, and it lasts until they are fully involved again in the new culture. Just crossing the border into a different country does not mean that they are integrated into that culture. It takes time and energy to fully become part of the culture and become a part of social groups there whether it is moving to a host country or returning to a passport country. This often takes a full calendar year or even longer.

Transitions are completed only if people have time to complete the entering stage and fully become a part of their host culture when they go or fully become a part of their passport culture when they return.

Completed Transitions

The earliest cross-cultural workers took months to cross oceans or continents to reach many other cultures. Ships under sail, wagons drawn by animals, and walking were slow enough to make it impossible to go home for a few days or weeks. So when people went, they stayed for years in their host culture. They did the same when they

returned to their passport cultures. Their transitions were completed.

When William Carey and his family sailed nonstop from England to India in 1793, it took five months. Little had changed from the times the apostle Paul served in the eastern Mediterranean (Acts 21).

Cross-cultural workers often went expecting to return many years later, if ever. The threat of disease was so great that some people packed their luggage in coffins, expecting to remain there until they died. They were not even thinking about coming home when they went.

Uncompleted Transitions on Return to the Passport Country

The invention of engines to power ships on the ocean and locomotives on railroads made crossing oceans and continents possible in weeks instead of months. Cross-cultural workers could return to their passport countries for a “furlough,” and they did, often staying for about a year. Soon it was common for them to serve four years in their host country, then spend a year in their passport country, and repeat this cycle for the rest of their lives.

Since it takes about a year to complete the entering stage, and the cross-cultural workers were planning to return to their host country all that time, they were entering and leaving at the same time. They were simultaneously in the entering and leaving stages, not knowing whether they were coming or going. The transitions into their passport countries were truncated. They never fully reentered. Coming “home” for a one-year furlough was quite different from coming home to stay.

Uncompleted Transitions into the Host Country

The invention of jet airplanes made it possible to cross oceans and continents in hours instead of weeks or months. Short-term service trips a week or two long became common. The people leaving had no intention of fully entering the host country because they remained in “vacation mode” while they were there.

Even “career” cross-cultural workers anywhere in the world knew that they could get “home” in hours, and they sometimes did. Some still fully entered their host cultures and returned to their passport countries only for special events such as weddings, funerals, and graduations. Others never fully entered their host countries but lived in their two worlds successively, coming home every summer for several weeks or months. They were never quite full time in either host or passport country, but part-time in each.

Living in Two Worlds Simultaneously

The invention of the telegraph and telephone made communication possible, but it was quite expensive, not available in many places, and of relatively poor quality. However, the digital age came about the turn of the 21st century, and its amenities were available most places cross-cultural workers served, inexpensive, and of excellent quality. It made communication with people back “home” commonplace. Some popular options became available.

- Email allows one to send written materials and images to someone’s computer where

it is available whenever the person checks the mail.

- Instant messaging allows two people to send and receive written messages to each other live, while both are online
- Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) allows people to converse orally while both are online, and they can even simultaneously see each other visually if they both have webcams and a fast enough connection.
- Facebook allows people to post written information and images on their page and allow their “friends” to access it.
- Twitter enables people to send short text messages to whoever wants to receive them, often items about everyday life.

Today it is no longer necessary for people to travel back to their passport cultures to keep up-to-date (even up to the minute) on what their friends are doing back there. Information is posted on Facebook, in an email, or even available as twitter on cell phones. No transitions need be completed because people can live simultaneously in two or more cultures. This has both advantages and parallel disadvantages.

Advantages

1. Living in two cultures is advantageous for projects involving “things” such as constructing buildings, installing radio stations, and cataloging library books.
2. It is a plus for being available for assistance on making decisions, and supplying information.
3. It is an asset for in-and-out projects that do not involve learning the language and the culture. People do not have to put in the years it takes to learn these, so they can accomplish more in less time

4. It is good for people who can keep up on issues in their passport culture so that changing cultures on reentry is not as much of a shock as when they had no contact with it for several years.

Disadvantages

1. Such a lifestyle is a hindrance for projects involving people, such as building relationships, disciplining, and mentoring.
2. It is a minus for not letting someone get a time of rest from problems while on assignment elsewhere. Furthermore, field directors who complained about decisions by people far away making decisions without really understanding may find themselves doing the same thing.
3. It is a liability for people who do not understand the culture because they may offend nationals by something as simple as using a gesture which is a sign of approval in one culture but obscene in another.
4. It is difficult for people who find themselves marginalized in both cultures, not really fitting in with either. For years we have referred to TCKs as growing up between cultures. These people are living between cultures with lack of a clear identity in either.

Conclusion

Uncompleted transitions have good and bad points. They may not only give people more of a sense of accomplishment for what they do but also give them a feeling of a lack of identity because they don't fit anywhere.

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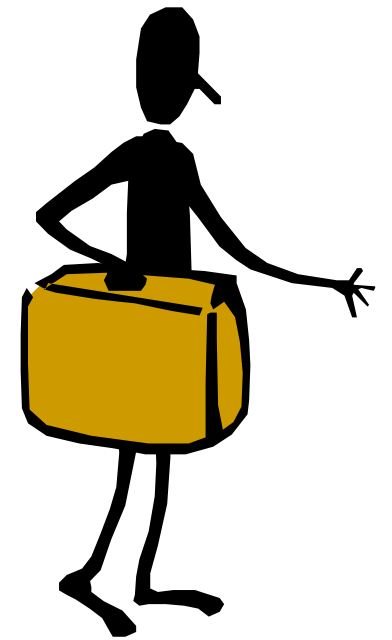
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