ASSUMING A NEW leadership role is hard even in the best of circumstances: relationships are undefined, routines are unfamiliar, and expectations are often unclear. Now imagine yourself heading up a new unit or project in a corporate and national culture radically different from your own. To strengthen their CVs, many ambitious executives willingly learn new languages, uproot their families, and puzzle over local laws and customs.

But an international management assignment can be a harrowing journey of sorts. Indeed, if they’ve never made an international move before, emerging leaders can fall into common traps that severely stress their family bonds, negatively affect their performance at work, damage their businesses, and even derail their careers.

That’s what it was like for a leader we’ll call Oscar Barrow. Six months into a new assignment in China, he had made several serious missteps with employees, the plant he’d been charged with turning around quickly was still struggling, and his tough corporate-lawyer wife was in meltdown mode. What happened?

Change Is Good – or Is It?
Oscar had worked for 10 years at a U.S.–based pharmaceuticals firm, moving relatively quickly from an entry-level position in manufacturing all the way up to a post as general manager in one of the company’s biggest domestic plants. The next logical step, he knew, was a trip overseas. That path would dovetail with his wife’s decision to leave her job as a partner at a leading law firm to spend more time caring for their two toddlers. The pharmaceuticals company boasted multiple operations in China, and he eagerly anticipated the challenge of living and
Managing Yourself Three Keys to Getting an Overseas Assignment Right

Oscar and Jennifer compounded their difficulties by choosing not to live in an expat community.

The senior managers and expected them to fall in line. They listened politely but said little and did less, and the plan went nowhere.

Even when he tried to reinforce positive behavior among his staff members, Oscar found himself making mistakes. Two months into his transition, for instance, he decided to recognize the outstanding production forecasting model created by a plant analyst. He praised her contribution in a meeting of the plant supervisors and was shocked by their reaction. Everyone looked down while the analyst squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. Only later, in a conversation with the head of HR, did Oscar realize that his focus on individual achievement ran counter to Chinese culture and its elevation of the collective over the individual.

Making matters worse, Oscar had undercut his recent address to staffers about “doing business the right way” by endorsing a visa application for a group of local Chinese officials who wanted to travel to the U.S., without really understanding what the group would be doing.

had opted to live in a neighborhood favored by the Chinese middle managers at the plant rather than one inhabited primarily by expatriates. This left her isolated, as she tried to set up the house and figure out the basics of living in China. Just a few weeks after his family had arrived, Oscar came home one night to find Jennifer in tears. “Five months ago, I was telling top executives what to do,” she said with a sob. “Now I can’t even ask the store clerk where to find the laundry detergent!”

The International Assignment Challenge

Oscar’s story demonstrates the complexities of making a successful transition from a leadership position in a familiar setting to a position of similar or even greater responsibility overseas. Although the recession is forcing companies to be more selective about overseas relocations, major firms continue to send managerial talent to strategically important countries such as China, India, Brazil, and the UK. Counting on expansion overseas to drive profitable growth, these organizations recognize the critical need to develop a cadre of “global” leaders who have the intellect and experience to move fluidly among diverse markets and cultures, and who can transfer systems, processes, and technologies around the world.

For their part, executives who gain international experience early in their careers enjoy greater agility and adaptability over the course of their work lives. They generally deal with complex management issues more adroitly than their “domestic” peers do. They also open themselves up to a broader set of opportunities, particularly in today’s global and heavily matrixed organizations.

So how do companies and leaders make sure they reap these benefits? Through our studies of international moves like Oscar’s, we have identified several fundamental principles for tackling the inevitable challenges that come with personal and organizational change. These simple rules can make the
difference between a successful leadership transition and a failed one. (For the complete list, see Your Next Move, Harvard Business Press, 2009.) Specifically, here are three principles for personal effectiveness in an overseas assignment.

**Principle 1: Establish the Family Foundation First**
You can’t be successful in your new role if your home life is in chaos. Some overseas assignments go to people without spouses or children; these managers need to set up support networks to combat feelings of isolation and dislocation. Here we’ll focus on the majority of expat leaders, who relocate to foreign cities with their families. It’s crucial to have in-depth, honest conversations about international assignments with your spouse – long before you make specific decisions about which opportunities you are (or are not) willing to pursue. You’ll both need to consider all the dimensions of change: the magnitude of the culture shift; the distance from home; the type of living situation you’ll be in; your spouse’s ability to find friendships, work, and other affiliations; and, if applicable, the schools your children will attend.

For Oscar and Jennifer, the move to China posed a greater challenge than they could fathom: According to a survey by Brokfield Global Replacement Services, China was the top destination for globally relocated executives in 2008, but it was also the location with the highest rate of assignment failure, because of the radical differences in living conditions and business environments. In discussing the move with his wife, Oscar glossed over things like dirty air and language barriers. He emphasized how good it would be for his career and for the children’s cognitive and social development. Also missing from that conversation was any acknowledgment of the big change Jennifer had just experienced – giving up a high-powered job to devote more time to the family.

If you minimize disruption for the family, you can increase the odds that everyone will thrive in the new setting.

For children, you should try to time the move to coincide with a natural break in their schooling. You should also arrange for extra support for your spouse while you’re setting up shop. This in-between time can be stressful for everyone – Jennifer learned the hard way, as she worked solo to prepare the couple’s apartment for sale and pack and ship their belongings to China.

Oscar and Jennifer compounded their difficulties by choosing not to live with other expats in a community designed to meet their needs. The impulse to live “with the people” is laudable and can certainly be rewarding. But for most managers, such a choice is inadvisable, particularly when the culture change is significant and when you’ve never relocated to another country. A crucial factor in making a smooth transition is to retain as much of the familiar as possible.

Everyone may already be in a defensive mind-set; it takes only a little reinforcement to cast this in concrete.

With that in mind, even before you step foot on a plane, identify the re-sources (spousal support networks and career and other counseling services for expatriates) that can help in your new location. Establish e-mail relationships with future colleagues so that from day one members of your family know people in country. If you have children, try to connect with other expats who have children the same age or attending the same school. Maintain regular communication with colleagues, friends, and family back home – invite them to visit, or even establish a blog that recounts the family’s adventures in your new home.

**Principle 2: Build Credibility and Openness from the Start**
New leaders tend to focus on the problems first – they try to fix what’s wrong, especially if the new role has been billed
Managing Yourself  Three Keys to Getting an Overseas Assignment Right

Creating Your Entry Plan
Executives can personally prepare themselves for an international assignment. Here’s a suggested to-do list.

Before You Move to a New Country
The days, weeks, and months leading up to your new assignment are crucial – and potentially maddening as you sort out the personal and professional challenges you’ve taken on.

Read as much as you can, gathering internal and external perspectives on the market and consumers. You won’t become an expert, so don’t even try. It’s awareness you’re looking for.

Identify local consultants who can brief you on the state of the market and the competitive environment. Set up meetings ahead of your arrival, and follow through when you’re in country.

Start learning the language. You may never become fluent, but your attempts will demonstrate respect.

Develop hypotheses about the situation you are entering: Is the organization in turnaround, realignment, or some other life-cycle stage? What’s the overall climate within the company? How deep is the talent pool?

Consult with your new boss, talk to critical stakeholders, and review any available performance data to gather insight and begin testing your hypotheses – but keep your views to yourself at this stage.

After You’ve Moved to a New Country
Without a good idea of what you’ll say and do in the first 24 hours, the first week, and the first month, you risk getting caught up in crisis management – reacting to each organizational flare-up rather than moving your own strategic agenda forward. You need to create and carry out a four-phase plan.

Diagnose the situation and align the leadership team around some early priorities – but don’t focus only on what’s wrong.

Establish strategic direction and align the organization around it.

Fix important systems and processes and strive for consistent execution.

Encourage the development of local talent in anticipation of your eventual exit.

as a turnaround, as Oscar’s was. The risk is that they’ll send the message “There is no good here.” While this is a pitfall for every new leader, it’s particularly problematic when one is moving from the home office to an international assignment: Everyone in the organization may already be in a defensive mind-set; it takes only a little reinforcement to cast this in concrete.

To avoid this trap, ask people lots of questions instead of making statements – even if, like Oscar, you’re pretty sure you know what the central issues are. Let colleagues and employees validate (or disprove) your theories, and avoid focusing exclusively on what’s wrong rather than what works, or on the data you don’t have versus the information you do. Setting up your office can wait. Go to the front lines right away, wherever they are, and really listen. If you start reaching out on day one, word will quickly spread across the organization.

While you’re still planning for your arrival, you may want to take stock of the stereotypes that might be associated with you, be they cultural, organizational, or even specific to your history with the company. Play against these stereotypes – using the local language, say, or demonstrating in meetings that you understand the strengths, problem areas, and idiosyncrasies of the organization you’re entering. Oscar’s failure to appreciate how Chinese culture differs from U.S. culture was apparent when he singled out the young plant analyst.

Oscar would have done well to identify some “cultural interpreters” inside and outside the company. Ideally, you will find at least two: an expatriate who has a lot of experience working in the culture you’re moving to, and a native who has a lot of experience working with expatriates. They can help you translate and deliver your intentions and ideas in context-appropriate ways. Even a leader with strong emotional intelligence in his home country can make grave miscalculations in a new culture.

Finally, if you have time, you should develop a written plan for your entry
into the company. (For guidelines on how to do this, see “Creating Your Entry Plan.”) Share it with your new direct reports, regional HR staffers, and your boss, so that they’ll understand how you intend to lead change at the organization.

**Principle 3: Get Serious About Compliance**

Business standards and the “rules of the game” can change dramatically when you move from one corporate and cultural climate to another. Local perspectives on what’s appropriate for business (and what isn’t) won’t necessarily match yours or those of the home office; sometimes that’s fine, but sometimes it’s fatal. The reality is that local auditing and other compliance systems may not fully protect you and your reputation.

It’s critical for transitioning international executives to consider, identify, and manage compliance issues. Indeed, they need to take on the unofficial role of chief compliance officer, systematically asking people on the front lines detailed questions about their actions, and moving quickly once problems arise. Most important, you must be able to differentiate between serious compliance lapses and unfamiliar but acceptable ways of doing business. This is especially important for leaders who are responsible for sales and operations; the risk factors here might include questionable deal-making practices (in sales) and poor quality control or contaminated raw materials (in operations). Any perceived lapses in a manager’s judgment can cast a long shadow – as Oscar learned the hard way. By approving the travel visas, he considerably weakened his credibility within the organization. Here again, cultural interpreters can be invaluable. Imagine if Oscar had tapped a trusted adviser, someone with years of experience on the ground in China – someone who might have steered the transitioning leader away from picking up that pen.

The journey can be unpredictable, and the pitfalls many, but an international assignment can be among the most exciting and challenging transitions an aspiring leader can undertake. With the right planning and attitudes, these leadership roles can stretch capabilities, challenge assumptions, and steer both people and profits in a positive direction.

Mark Alan Clouse is the managing director of Kraft Foods Brazil. He was previously managing director of Kraft in greater China. Michael D. Watkins (mwatkins@genesisadvisers.com) is the chairman of Genesis Advisers, a Newton, Massachusetts–based leadership development firm. He is the author of The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels (Harvard Business Press, 2002). His new book is Your Next Move (Harvard Business Press, 2009).

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