

TAKING THE PLUNGE INTO A NEW WORLD

Most of you might think I am crazy, doing what I did. I spent eight years of my life working my tail off to build up my career as an intercultural specialist, coach and trainer in Switzerland. I had finally made it. I was delivering training in English and German to the biggest companies in the country, coaching across industries and all the way up to the C-Suite.

In my personal life I also “had it all” – the amazing husband, two adorable children, 12-minute walk to work, daycare across the street and the coveted garden in the back of a cozy apartment. (Ok, well maybe my cats were terrorizing me, but that is a minor detail).

And then, one day, we decided to change it all and move to the 3rd poorest country on the planet.

By now you must be thinking, “Who in their right mind would do this?!” In the first of this two-part series, I am going to let you in on the why and how I did it. These lessons will serve you immensely when you are making your own big move. You will also come away with clear direction on how to establish connection in a new place and make sure that you don’t limit yourself to only those who are culturally similar to you. For a sneak peek of what you’ll find in the second part of the series, I can promise you an insider’s perspective of what it was like for me to make the leap from a secure and idyllic life to a West African adventure. Along the way, I’ll offer you expert insight on how you can perform and enjoy your own journey.

Know your “Why”

Giving up all that you have built in a new country as a non-native speaker is not for the faint of heart. I knew the only way for me to do this without regrets was to get crystal clear on why I was taking the leap.

List the big “Whys” behind your move.

For me, this list included exposing my children to a wider variety of cultural experiences, improving my French, living in a developing

By Sundae Schneider-Bean



context, better understanding the lives of trailing spouses and – quite simply – walking the talk. I am committed to helping my clients be successful across cultures while they do their best to live well and enjoy the adventure. I wanted to dive into a new adventure. I was itching take my personal and professional competencies to the next level. This list of “whys” goes on, and I refer back to this list when I have moments of doubt or struggle with something related to living in West Africa. For those of you who are faced with taking your own major leap, get clarity:

Start understanding “How”

One of the fears I battled about leaving what I had built up in Switzerland was around “losing it all.” Thankfully, one day over lunch a friend helped me realize that starting from zero wasn’t possible: I was taking my competencies and experience with me. I took confidence in knowing that didn’t have to start from scratch. This is especially important for trailing spouses to remember:

When making the big move, take note of the competencies and experience you bring along.

My professional experience and own intercultural competences would not only enable me to keep my business afloat, they would enable me to enjoy the ride.

The team at Intercultural Business Improvement Ltd. understands that part of the “how” of being effective across cultures is connecting with people from different backgrounds, performing in a highly diverse environment and enjoying cultural diversity as a continuous learning process. Their Intercultural Readiness Check helps expatriates to assess how they can enhance their intercultural effectiveness.

In Part One of this series, I focus on the first step of being interculturally effective – connection. I share what this looks like in my community and the steps you can take to connect with people from different backgrounds.

Connection is the first step to succeeding across cultures.

In Switzerland, we had established a large and close-knit community of friends. I had also professionally established an extensive network of whom I could rely on for support and ideas. I knew very well that if we

Having the responsibilities to bring together people from different parts of the world I have found the Intercultural Readiness Check a very helpful tool.

Karen Lutz, SCA, HR
Director Middle East and Africa

were to be happy during the four years slated to be in Burkina, we would have to reach out and connect.

The expatriate community in Ouagadougou is small – yet mobile. I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly I had met a number of interesting people, many of whom I was lucky to call my friend or client.

In Switzerland, most of my friends and contacts were Swiss (with the exception of an eclectic representation of bi-national couples). The expat community I was introduced to in Ouagadougou; however, varies by nationality and language as much it does by industry. What was very similar to Switzerland, though, was that it takes more time to get to know the locals. My observations suggest that the Burkinabé are heavily embedded in their own family, social networks and obligations – leaving little space to connect with those outside of this large circle.

I don't dare say that Burkina Faso is the Switzerland of West Africa, but there are parallels regarding the speed at which you can become embedded in local life. Today I am sharing with you my tried-and-true strategy to find connection in a new environment. This also helps you be mindful that your connections are being developed with people from diverse backgrounds. Here is what has worked for me and my clients:

S – M – L

S is for the short-term. Who can you connect with right away (expat or local)? Who can you meet that seems to be open to spending some free time? Who do you already know professionally in the area? Make an effort to connect with them personally or professionally this week. Focus on these connections for the first month or two.

M is for the mid-term. Once you have settled in, it is time to get involved in a community activity or hobby in your area that interests you. The chances of meeting someone whom you connect with are higher if there is a shared passion, competency or interest.

L is for the long-term. This category is reserved for those who are hardest to get to know. Don't give up. To get to know harder-to-connect-with individuals or cultural groups, building trust and getting out of one's comfort zone is often the key. Use every opportunity you have to establish presence, build trust or identify commonalities. Find others who can serve as a "bridge" for you. Be persistent yet respectful of boundaries.

By now you should be clear on the “why” and “how” of your new life, as well have a clear strategy to connect with people from a variety of backgrounds. You are definitely on your way to high performance and pure enjoyment.

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UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE IRC CENTER

Intercultural Readiness Check Licensing Courses 2015

Singapore, January 20 and 21

Amsterdam, June 23 and 24

Munich, October 29 and 30

Amsterdam, December 10 and 11

Intercultural Readiness Check Train-the-Trainer Workshop 2015

Amsterdam, June 25 and 26

Intercultural Readiness Check Annual Get Together 2015

Amsterdam, Saturday 27 June

STAY CONNECTED

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Even if you are not working in an intercultural context, you will find that the competences assessed by the Intercultural Readiness Check are essential for executives and teams to turn the challenges of their complex and changing business context into opportunities for innovation.

Roger D. Lehman, Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise, INSEAD

The Intercultural Readiness Check has added the intercultural competence perspective to our development centers for high potentials. From the start, participants have recognized the IRC feedback as valuable and informative; they welcome the IRC assessment as an opportunity to reflect about how to improve their current intercultural approach. The IRC has become a fixed element in our international development centers.

Brigitte Steuck, Corporate Human Resources, Personnel Development, Talent Management, BSH Bosch und Siemens Hausgeräte GmbH