

*“We have only to follow the thread of the hero path....
And where we had thought to travel outward, we
will come to the center of our own existence.
And where we had thought to be alone,
we will be one with the world.”*

—Joseph Campbell

Working Abroad: a Hero's Adventure

BY JOYCE SAUTTERS OSLAND

Odysseus faced the cyclops and the sirens. Hercules performed 12 seemingly impossible labors. The heroes of mythology have much in common with successful modern-day expatriates, as unlikely as the comparison may seem. The stages of “the hero's adventure”—as mapped out by Joseph Campbell—provide a useful outline of the challenges that await firms and individuals who venture into foreign lands.

Let's compare the plot of the hero's adventure with the plight of expatriate businesspeople.

Expatriates leave behind the domestic offices of their organizations

What do modern-day expatriates have in common with Odysseus and Hercules? The stages of a mythological hero's adventure provide a useful outline of the challenges that await companies and people who venture across borders.

and the social support of their established lives. They embark on overseas assignments that are fascinating and full of adventure—but initially lonely.

Like Odysseus, the newly arrived expatriate faces new locations that are shrouded in ambiguity and full of unknown languages and customs. Like Hercules, the expatriate faces tasks that are challenging—often well beyond what the same person would have been asked to accomplish in the home country. In most cases, an expatriate has more autonomy and more responsibility than back home.

Modern-day expatriates aren't in much danger of encountering a

cyclops or the Hydra. But unfamiliar obstacles of all stripes and colors do appear during an overseas assignment. They force the adventuring hero to question his or her own identity, values, and assumptions about everyday life.

Some of the obstacles appear in the form of paradoxes an expatriate must learn to resolve, such as how much of his or her own identity the expatriate must give up in order to be accepted by a different culture.

When expatriates perform their tasks successfully and learn to adapt to other cultures, they experience a solid sense of satisfaction and mastery. For many, the return home is marked by a sense of loss at leaving behind the magical charm and fulfillment of the sojourn. But among other changes, expatriates tend to return with greater understanding of foreign lands; increased self-awareness, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills; and more tolerance for differences among people.

I interviewed 35 U.S. expatriates after their overseas assignments. Their comments echo the themes that surfaced repeatedly during my own 14 years of expatriate life.

My interview subjects never referred to themselves as heroes, but they spoke of the satisfaction of mastery, the difficulties of negotiating obstacles and paradoxes, and the recognition of personal transformation that came to them through their overseas assignments. All of those qualities are characteristic of a mythical hero's adventure.

The stages outlined in such myths can help companies and individuals look beyond the practical journey and prepare for the psychological territory that expatriates traverse.

A call to adventure: choosing expatriates

Mythical heroes come in two types—those who choose to undertake their journeys and those who blunder into them. The same is true of expatriates.

Most expatriates I interviewed (80 percent) reported that they were thrilled when they first heard about the possibility of going abroad. Several decided instantly to accept the overseas assignments. Others hesitated only long enough to obtain the agreement of their spouses.

The Organization and the Hero

Companies can facilitate the hero's adventure for expatriate employees at all stages of their journeys. A company's role involves the following steps:

- ▶ selecting people with a strong desire to go abroad
- ▶ acknowledging the uncertainty of the first months in an overseas assignment, understanding that expatriates may feel off-balance at this time, and refraining from actions that would add to their uncertainty
- ▶ removing "threshold guardians" that might preclude acculturation (for example, by offering good language training)
- ▶ providing cultural mentors and headquarters sponsors
- ▶ preparing expatriates for the paradoxes they will confront
- ▶ acknowledging that returning expatriates have changed and grown while abroad, and making use of the boons they bring home
- ▶ removing the uncertainty about repatriation arrangements
- ▶ assigning former expatriates to challenging domestic jobs.

In *Living Abroad*, a 1982 study of Swedish expatriates, author Torbjorn writes that expatriates should really want to work abroad—even to the point of being idealistic or having a sense of mission. Only employees who show high levels of enthusiasm and involvement are likely to make the necessary sacrifices and to be committed to achieving a real understanding and acceptance of the conditions in the host country.

Expatriates who are ambivalent at first—those who do not perceive an overseas assignment as a call to adventure—might eventually develop that perception while abroad. That's because the challenges inherent in an overseas assignment tend to elicit heroism in many people.

Other expatriates refuse the call, but their companies force them to accept assignments abroad. The expatriate who has absolutely no desire to go is the least likely to adjust overseas. Unwilling expatriates survive,

but their stories about their experience are more negative than stories from expatriates who willingly accepted their assignments.

In general, expatriates who were ambivalent or unhappy about going abroad also tend to assign low ratings to their own adjustment to living overseas, compared to the ratings from those who wanted to go abroad.

In other words, expatriates—like mythical heroes—should be ready for the adventure.

The threshold and its guardians: preparing for challenges

In heroic adventure myths, crossing the first threshold occurs when heroes step outside their normal world to enter the realm of the unknown. For expatriates, this phase consists of leaving home and crossing the physical and cultural threshold of a foreign land.

Most expatriates say that this stage lasts about six months and is characterized by uncertainty; difficulty; strangeness; exhilaration; extreme ups and downs; and intense, accelerated learning.

For one American auditor, the realization that he had crossed a threshold came on his first day in a foreign assignment. A manager met him in the host country and gave him a brief refresher course in driving a manual transmission. Then the manager filled the tank with petrol (gasoline) for him and left him on his own.

"And there I was," recalled the auditor, "with the car and no map and 200 miles to drive that day—with a stick shift, and sitting on the wrong side of the front seat. It was a little terrifying—a white-knuckle drive. The first few days were typical in that respect."

During the early phase of the journey, expatriates are likely to have an encounter with one or more "threshold guardians," like those that guard the entrances to mythological realms. In mythology, the purpose of the guardians, of course, is to keep the unworthy from passing on to another region. The guardians that challenge expatriates may seem less tangible, but they serve a similar purpose.

One well-aculturated American banker working in Japan discovered that his language proficiency "opened doors" when he and his wife were

moderately fluent in Japanese. But later, when he learned the language well enough to be mistaken on the phone for a native-born Japanese, he felt a difference in the way he was received.

"Distrustful is the wrong word," the banker explained. Japanese who encounter a Japanese-speaking American, he said, "lose their standard ways to deal with Americans. They wonder if you have compromised your own national identity in order to learn their language so well. And that type of compromise, generically speaking, would not be well regarded among Japanese. ... It's a very important concept to them."

Many expatriates experience the frustration of being blocked or limited as they try to enter another culture. Generally, the threshold guardians that expatriates encounter fall into four categories:

- ▶ a lack of language ability
- ▶ the host culture's disinclination to assimilate foreigners

"IT WAS TERRIFYING, A WHITE-KNUCKLE DRIVE"

- ▶ a tight leash from company headquarters
- ▶ the restrictive nature of overseas expatriate communities.

The magical friend: finding mentors

In mythology, heroes are often helped by magical friends, who tend to appear in the form of guides, teachers, ferry operators, and so forth. A magical friend explains how to get beyond difficult obstacles or provides assurance that the hero will not be harmed.

For the expatriate, magical friends are most often found in the form of

cultural mentors—people from the host culture who translate that culture for expatriates and warn them of potential pitfalls.

Acculturation strategies are the basis for an expatriate pecking order. The most respected expatriates in an international business community are bicultural. They speak the local language fluently, they are well integrated into the local culture and the international expatriate circle, they know a lot about the host culture, and they are effective at work.

Two other groups of expatriates are not very well respected:

- ▶ expatriates who "go native," rejecting their own culture and fully embracing the host culture
- ▶ expatriates who live in the "golden ghetto," rejecting the local culture and idealizing their own culture (Bochner, 1982).

The effective expatriate makes a serious effort to acculturate and to work within the other culture—often with the help of cultural mentors.



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Relationships with cultural mentors often involve a mutual sharing of questions and information about both cultures.

An international lawyer said he attributed his high degree of acculturation in Brussels to a person from the host culture who "basically looked at me in the Ugly American role and viewed it as her job to educate me in

the ways in which refined people in Europe conduct themselves.... She would take me along to luncheons and dinner parties and introduce me to all the right people and make sure that I said the right things at the right time."

There is a strong link between being well-aculturated and successful and having a cultural mentor. In my study, expatriates with cultural mentors tend-

ed to be more fluent in the language of their host country; they typically perceived themselves as being better adapted to the working conditions and general living conditions abroad. They were also more aware of the paradoxes of expatriate life and received higher performance-appraisal ratings from their bosses and themselves.

The role of the magical friend may also be played by other Americans, by experienced host-country residents of various nationalities, by career mentors back at company headquarters, or by members of social or commercial networks (international schools, churches, social or athletic clubs, and business associations).

Whatever form the magical friend takes, the function of that friend is to provide expatriates with the moral support and guidance they need to survive the trials and obstacles that make up the next stage in the hero's adventure.

The road of trials: understanding paradoxes

In myths, heroes are confronted with numerous obstacles and tests on their "road of trials." Expatriates can relate a litany of obstacles and challenges of their own, which they must overcome with patience, humor, and positive attitudes.

Paradoxes constitute a particular form of expatriate obstacle, one that is highly significant but less well-researched and articulated than the other obstacles expatriates encounter in a cross-cultural experience. A paradox is a situation in which a person faces contradictory, mutually exclusive elements at the same time. Paradoxes occur because expatriates are mediating between two cultures and two organizations.

For example, an expatriate may face a mediation paradox if there is a lack of integrated goals between corporate headquarters and the foreign subsidiary. Paradoxes can also occur if these two entities have different ways of operating and do not understand each other's culture. Managers at corporate headquarters often ask expatriates to do things that are acceptable in the home culture but not in the host culture.

One U.S. scientist who was researching a new technology at a

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German university was stymied by the differences in the ways in which Americans and Germans exchange information.

"My bosses back home said, 'See what you can find out. Give them part of the information and then try to get some back from them,'" the scientist explained. "I said, 'The Germans don't deal that way. They are straightforward and honest. Just call a spade a spade, and that's that....' The company wasn't asking me to do anything deceitful; it was just a different way of doing things."

The ultimate boon: achieving knowledge as power

As they traverse the road of trials, mythical heroes penetrate to a source of power, transforming themselves in the process. For expatriates, the sources of power are a little different. Some of the more important sources:

- ▶ bicultural perspectives
- ▶ increased self-awareness
- ▶ the knowledge that they have the inner resources to master difficult situations.

An expatriates' consciousness is transformed by exposure to cultural differences, trials, and paradoxes, aided at times by explanations from cultural mentors.

Expatriates describe their transformation as a process of "letting go" and "taking on." They let go of cultural certainty (an ethnocentric faith and pride in one's own country), and they take on the other culture's perceptions of their own culture. The combination leads to a more balanced view of strengths and weaknesses.

Successful expatriates let go of their unquestioned acceptance of basic cultural assumptions; they take on the internalized values of the other culture. They relinquish their own frames of reference and create new frames of reference that don't involve negative comparisons with things at home. They let go of the unexamined life in favor of a constructed or composed life. They yield their accustomed roles and status and take on the roles assigned to them.

They acknowledge that behavior that is rewarded or reinforced at home is not always effective in the other culture, so they adapt themselves to the local norms. They give up their accus-

SOME FIRMS TREAT RETURNING EXPATRIATES AS HEROES

tomized habits and activities and make do with new ones that serve the same purposes. And they relinquish their known routines and take on an addiction to novelty and learning.

When we ask expatriates how they changed overseas, or what boons they received as a result of their adventures, they point to positive changes in themselves, new attitudes, improved work skills, increased knowledge, and closer family relationships.

The return: achieving successful repatriation

Crossing the return threshold and coming home can be very difficult for both mythical heroes and modern expatriates. Both return from a life-changing experience that is hard to share with those who have not been through similar events.

Some companies treat their returning expatriates as heroes and make use of the skills they have honed abroad. Others do not.

Companies can alleviate some of the difficulties of repatriation if they accord their expatriates a hero's welcome. They can recognize and make use of a former expatriate's expertise by assigning her or him to a challenging job that uses the new skills developed abroad and that requires the kind of continuous learning the person enjoyed while overseas.

In a study cited by Black and Mendenhall, 60 percent to 70 percent of repatriating employees didn't know what position they would fill before they returned home. And only two-thirds of the expatriates I interviewed reported that they were permitted to use back at home the skills they learned abroad.

Retaining employees with international skills is a serious problem. About 20 percent of expatriates resign after repatriation, and their companies lose the benefit of their hard-won knowledge.

Sustaining immeasurable growth

Companies that understand the subjective experience of expatriates can smooth the path of the hero's adventure as expatriate employees traverse its stages, from preparation to repatriation. See the box for a list of steps companies can take to ease the way for expatriate employees.

In planning to send an employee overseas, organizations should understand that living abroad can be the most significant experience of a person's life.

When asked if they would choose to return abroad, only 6 percent of the expatriates I interviewed answered no. Sixty percent said they would definitely go abroad again if they had the chance; 34 percent said it would depend on the job, the location, and their family.

When they talked about why they would go abroad again, expatriates described the essence of the experience—what it meant to them. After returning home, they missed the daily opportunities to learn new things, the excitement, the feeling of being special and more alive, and the high level of challenge. In short, they missed the rich adventures and the immeasurable growth of walking what Joseph Campbell calls the "hero path."

And companies, like cultures, have much to gain by understanding the nature of their heroes' adventures. ■

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