

# WHAT WOMEN WANT

## CUSTOMIZING CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING TO BETTER PREPARE FEMALE TRANSFEREES

BY DR. ANNE COPELAND

*Dorothy is a senior manager in the financial sector. She is being sent to Tokyo for two years to try to straighten out some problems the company's team is facing, and to grow the Asian segment of their business. Prior to departure, her boss enrolls her in a cross-cultural training course that the last three transferees – all men – loved. Dorothy completed the course yet feels that, somehow, it missed the mark. The trainer didn't adequately address her concerns or consider her skills.*

As the number of female expatriate managers grows, this scenario is, sadly, becoming increasingly commonplace. Cross-cultural trainers cannot contribute to a woman's successful assignment unless they consider the ways her overseas experience differs from a man's. Research strongly supports the necessity of understanding gender issues in international moves:

\* Psychological research shows that, compared to men, women tend to be especially good at non-verbal communication; at understanding subtle power hierarchies; and at developing consensus in groups. These skills are not always explicitly valued in the US and Europe, so western women may not be aware of the potential goldmine they carry with them. In navigating any new culture, these skills are critical to success. Bringing them to the surface prepares women to use them to their advantage.

\* Research also shows that women are likely to be the relationship tenders in their respective families and workplaces. Accordingly, they know who in the family is doing well and who is not; they worry about what this one said to that one; and they take action to smooth, support and redirect feelings. On an international assignment, there is often a lot to smooth, support and redirect within the family. And relationships with extended family continue to require their tending, and from a greater distance. Highlighting common family reactions, role changes and relationship tensions before they happen can prepare women to foresee and deal with them effectively.

\* Another research study on relocating women has pointed out that a number of specific losses associated with moving can be considered especially feminine, including losses in sense of home, in physical identity, in connections with family and in social role identity. Women who prepare for these changes will feel them less as losses and more as opportunities.

\* Finally, research on female expatriate managers shows that they tend to be successful, despite dire predictions that gender discrimination will interfere with their ability to work effectively in a new country. An explanation for this is that in some cultures, nationality and job status trump gender. For example, when the author was working in the UK, the fact that she was the visiting, ranking American academic voice seemed to counterbalance the fact that she was a (very pregnant) woman. Still, the role of women in the workplace in a new culture is something that all expatriates and their employers benefit from understanding. Preparing for how gender discrimination might – and might not – occur can get women transferees off on the right foot.

Like men, women need a full course of country-specific information, training in culture and communication and preparation for adjustment issues. But attention to these other, unique, features will give the training more impact.

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