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MANAGING YOURSELF

How to Embrace Complex Change

A framework for navigating big career transitions
by *Linda Brimm*

Asian city-state for 12 years—that's where she and Phil had met—and still had a strong network there. The couple had always talked about going back someday. Had the time come? Could she and her family effectively manage such a significant change?

For ambitious, talented executives working in dynamic global businesses, big career transitions—to new roles, organizations, industries, or geographic locations—are a fact of life. So is the need to constantly adapt to new technologies, work groups, strategies, and ways of thinking and behaving.

And yet even seasoned professionals like Denise find personal change difficult. Often the problem is internal—they worry they're not up to the new tasks. Sometimes loved ones are the stumbling block—a spouse or a child doesn't like the idea of a different work schedule or a relocation. Or the issue could be colleagues—for example, when a new arrival

isn't welcomed by the team.

Although some people can overcome such challenges with relative ease, I've learned in decades of teaching MBA students and coaching executives that most of us can't. Management researchers have a lot to say about the best way to approach organizational change, and companies have put their advice to good use. But when it comes to personal transitions, there is no blueprint for success, and many leaders still struggle. So I've developed a

framework for thinking about change. It involves navigating through what I call the Seven C's:

- *Complexity*—considering all the issues at play in a change effort
- *Clarity*—understanding and prioritizing those issues
- *Confidence*—believing that the change can be made successfully
- *Creativity*—brainstorming innovative solutions to problems that arise
- *Commitment*—taking the first steps to implement the change
- *Consolidation*—leaving the previous identity to adopt the new one
- *Change*—living into the change and its consequences

I've seen this approach work for Denise and others in similar circumstances: Joe, who left an Australian consultancy to start an NGO in China and later moved to Hong Kong; Caroline, a well-traveled manager who learned to embrace public speaking so that she could continue to rise through the ranks in her industry; Melissa, a married mother of two-year-old twins who decided she wanted to move from Spain to the United States to continue her career; and Dave, an executive who gave up a nomadic lifestyle to settle down and start a family at age 35.

The process is set in motion by an event that demands

change. That event could be positive or negative, spurred by external factors or self-initiated—an unsolicited job offer or an illness, a new interest or boredom with a current position. The process is complete when a different

direction has been established and the change is fully realized.

Complexity

When Denise heard about the Singapore job, it sparked multiple questions in her mind. Did she want it? Could she get it? Would she succeed in it? How would it affect her career? Were there other opportunities within or outside her company that she should also consider? What would Phil and the girls think? How would a move and a new role change her relationship with them? Would she and they enjoy living in Asia?

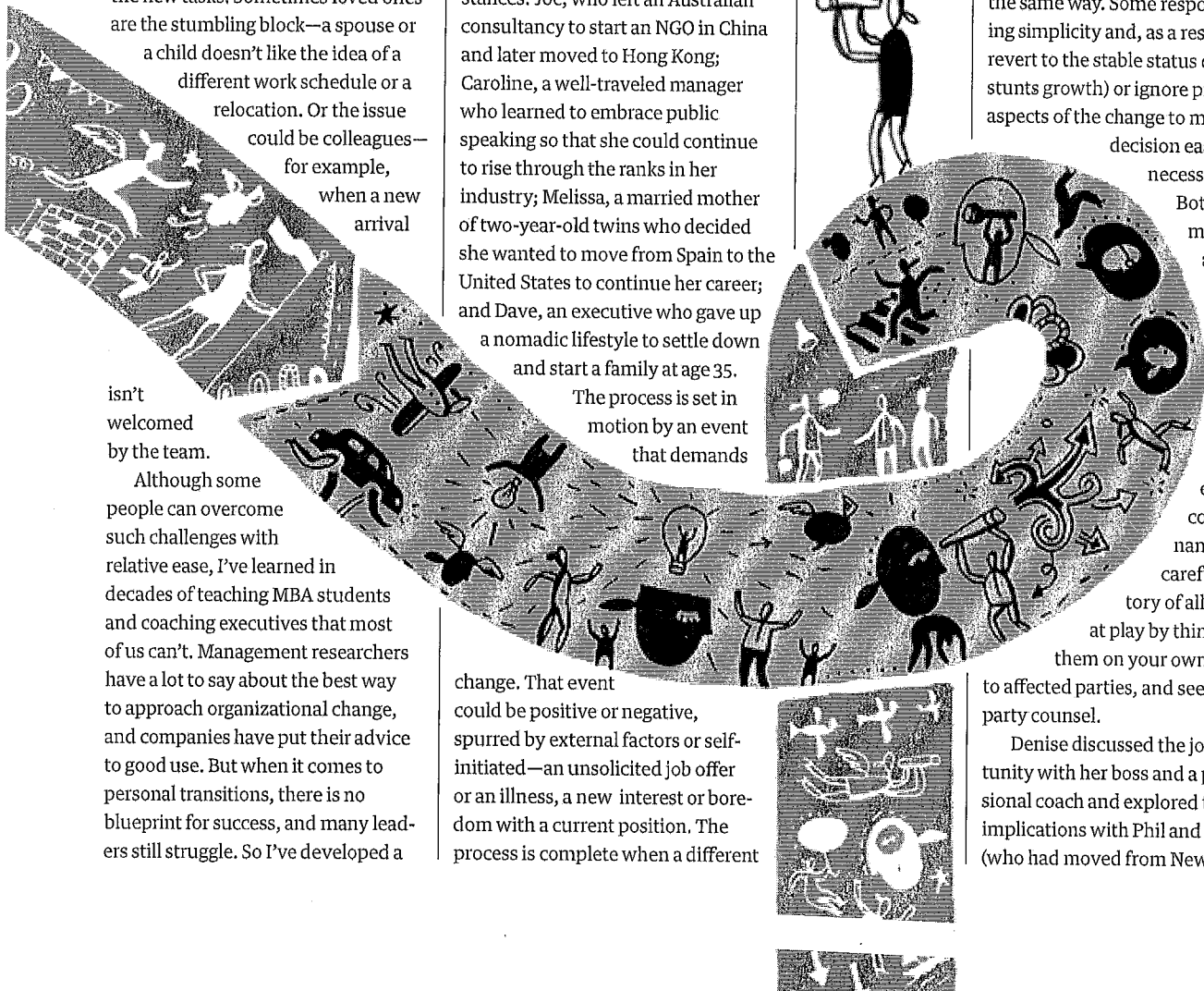
She felt overwhelmed by the number of variables to consider. Most executives in her situation feel the same way. Some respond by seeking simplicity and, as a result, either revert to the stable status quo (which stunts growth) or ignore problematic aspects of the change to make the

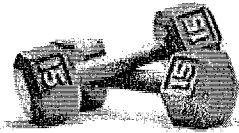
decision easier (but not necessarily wiser).

Both coping mechanisms are counterproductive.

To kick off a successful change effort, you must embrace its complex dynamics. Take careful inventory of all the factors at play by thinking about them on your own, talking to affected parties, and seeking third-party counsel.

Denise discussed the job opportunity with her boss and a professional coach and explored the family implications with Phil and her parents (who had moved from New York to





Men who exercise at least three times a week earn nearly 7% more, on average, than those who don't exercise, according to an analysis of longitudinal U.S. survey data. For women, the regular-exercise premium is nearly 12%. Exercising even once a week yields significant wage gains too.

"The Effect of Exercise on Earnings: Evidence from the NLS," by Vasilios D. Kostetas

Hong Kong when she was 10). They talked about how the move would affect not only him and the girls but also Denise's in-laws, who'd grown accustomed to seeing their grandchildren. Denise called her contacts in Singapore for advice about housing and schools. Taken together, colleagues, family, and friends all helped her grasp what the change might mean for her and those around her, personally and professionally.

Clarity

You have to fully understand, organize, and prioritize all the factors to reduce your anxiety about them. The clearer you are about what's most important to you, the less anxious you feel, and the easier it is to find even greater clarity. This task requires deep reflection along with conversations with the right external resources. You should rely on people in your network who will listen without judgment and will set aside their own preferences and biases to help you weigh the pros and cons of the change.

Through conversations with her coach and trusted friends and colleagues, Denise realized that this job was her chance to make a real difference in her career—something that she valued more than the ease of family life in London. The position sounded fabulous. She would need to learn more about it and certainly to negotiate with Phil to ensure that a move would work for the family, but she knew she wanted to take the plunge. Clarity about her own desire enabled her to shift her focus to them.

Confidence

An executive must feel capable of managing the change while realizing that many challenges can't be predicted or controlled. You want just the right amount of confidence. Too much, and you risk missing key

or newly emerging information. Too little, and you'll be paralyzed in the face of the difficulties inherent in any change process. Belief in oneself is mostly conditioned by life history, but it can be facilitated by small actions, such as connecting with someone who offers personal support, resolving even minor problems associated with the change, or envisioning a successful outcome. I've found that this positive outlook is critical to maintaining the energy required for the remaining C's in the cycle.

Denise bolstered her confidence by thinking about past conversations she'd had with her boss and her husband. Both thought she was ready for something bigger. She had strong Chinese-language skills and good relationships in Asia and in the home office. When she touched base with a few people in her network to ask if they thought she'd do well in Singapore after many years in Europe, and as a country head instead of a marketer, the feedback was positive. She felt qualified for the job. After the move to London, Phil had agreed that the next big work/life decision would be hers. And although he would need time to seek a transfer to his firm's Singapore office or to find a new job, and the girls would have to stay in London for the rest of the school year, she was sure everyone could handle a geographic separation for a short period. She and Phil already traveled for work, so their au pair was accustomed to managing in their absence.

Creativity

Innovation is key to any successful change effort. When confronted with problems—early or late, large or small, expected or unexpected—you must find creative but realistic solutions, adapting strategies used in the past and developing new ones. Again, look to trusted members of your network

and seek out new contacts with relevant experience to test your ideas and help you generate solutions.

Denise put her hand up for the job and was given a warm reception; her company needed the new country manager to start right away. Still, her action prompted a host of concerns. Her boss was worried about who would replace her in the London office. But Denise remembered a colleague in her company's Brazilian office who might be a good fit and wanted to move back to London anyway, so she put the two in touch. Her husband couldn't imagine how he would do his current job, search for a new one, and handle more household and child care responsibilities. Denise decided to turn to her mother for help—something she'd never done before. Her girls were unsure about moving to a new country, so she asked the company to send the whole family to Singapore with a relocation expert who could help them look at apartments and schools. She even organized a weekend trip to Bali, where everyone could relax and envision the possibilities together.

Commitment

Once you're ready to commit to a good, realistic course of action and implement it to the best of your ability, you need to close off other options—including escape—and move forward. This is often the hardest step, but there can be no change without it. Executives tell me it's helpful to think about their decision not as right or wrong but as a different path. You're no longer weighing the pros and cons of the decision or second-guessing it; you're working to make it successful.

Denise accepted the position and started work in Singapore. Phil began to talk to contacts about jobs there. Both tried to get the children excited about the apartment complex (with



Are you poised for a career change? To find out, visit HBR.org/assessments/rethink-your-career.

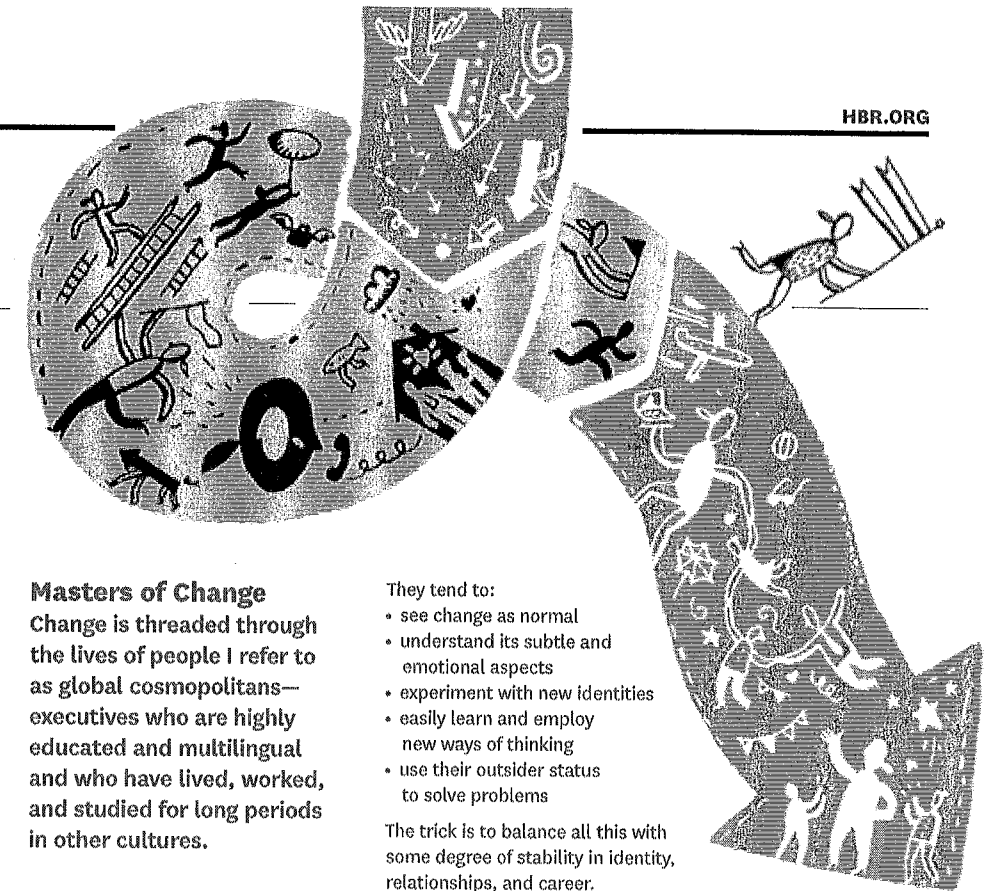
a swimming pool!) they would soon move to and the international French-language school they would attend the following year. With her family now also committed to the change, Denise could focus on performing well in her new role. Since Phil and the girls were still in London, she arranged an intense, weeks-long tour of the region to introduce herself to key colleagues.

Consolidation

This phase involves letting go of the previous situation so that new possibilities can arise. Some aspects of your old identity must be set aside or abandoned as you adapt. People at a new company who use “we” to refer to their former employer have not yet consolidated the change; “we” should mean the current team.

Some individuals get through this stage by focusing not on what they’ve lost but on what they’ve gained. They regard change as developmental—something that brings them closer to a “true self” or to possibilities they might now achieve. Surprisingly, anchors in your past daily life—even as minor as familiar foods—may help provide a stable basis for safe experimentation with your new identity.

Denise was exhausted during her first few months on the new job. Flying around Asia and back and forth to London, she felt torn between two lives. The colleague she’d recommended for her old job hadn’t worked out. Phil and the girls missed her, and she missed them. Her mother had been very helpful but was eager to get back to her own home. Denise countered these negative aspects by focusing on everything that was going right. She felt exhilarated by her leadership position. Her transition had gone smoothly, she was excited to be taking the team forward, and she was proud of herself. The rest of the family



Masters of Change
Change is threaded through the lives of people I refer to as global cosmopolitans—executives who are highly educated and multilingual and who have lived, worked, and studied for long periods in other cultures.

They tend to:

- see change as normal
- understand its subtle and emotional aspects
- experiment with new identities
- easily learn and employ new ways of thinking
- use their outsider status to solve problems

The trick is to balance all this with some degree of stability in identity, relationships, and career.

would move soon. She’d been looking into summer activities for the girls.

Change

The final step in the process is living into the change, savoring its positive outcomes while dealing with any unintended consequences or new challenges that arise. This isn’t a static state, of course. You must also be on the lookout for new opportunities that may lead to your next change effort.


Denise was thrilled when Phil and the girls finally arrived in Singapore. But further adjustments were needed: She was working longer hours and traveling more than she had in London, which was difficult for everyone to get used to. Her solution was to book extended time off for family vacations during quiet periods at work. Those breaks, combined with the great work her team was doing, helped her feel both energized by and more comfortable in her new life.

CHANGE IS DIFFICULT, but for leaders who want to succeed in today’s business environment, it’s inevitable. The Seven C’s are a way to think through

potential transitions and effectively execute on new courses of action. They can be used to communicate your change story to others and to learn from the experience.

How much time it takes to navigate the process varies dramatically according to the individual and the circumstances. Some people linger in one stage, unable to complete the tasks required to move on. Some take extra time for personal reflection or to allow significant others to catch up with their thinking. Some move too quickly through a stage and must return to confront unresolved issues. For those wondering how to progress through the Seven C’s, the best (if somewhat unsatisfying) advice is: Move as fast as you can. Take as long as you must. But stick to the process. Executives who have mastered it find that it becomes the cornerstone of their resilience and success. ♥

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 **Linda Brimm** is an emeritus professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD and the author of *Global Cosmopolitans: The Creative Edge of Difference* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

