

Culture shock unwrapped

Getting to grips with a new country can be a challenge. The additional need to understand your new business culture and colleagues means international employees can crumble beneath the strain. Dr Elisabeth Marx explains.

It is estimated that one in seven UK managers fails on international assignments, and this figure is even higher for US managers, with an estimated failure rate of 25 to 40 per cent. Managers differ in the way they respond to culture shock. Some are able to adapt in an almost chameleon-like way to different countries whereas others cling desperately to their habits and national approaches.

What makes some international executives highly successful whereas others struggle with basic everyday activities? If we are all so 'global' nowadays, what makes some of us more international than others? It is not the number of air miles we clock up on transatlantic flights, nor the technical excellence we bring to our jobs that makes some of us more 'global' than others. Some international executives are highly successful while others struggle with basic everyday activities. We now know that it is our ability to manage culture shock in international business that makes a difference between failure and success.

One British executive was interviewed about his international experience working in France and reported the following:

'My adaptation was appallingly difficult. I thought I knew the French, but I only knew them socially and not in a working environment. I found that all the normal ways of managing people in the UK did not work in France. The things I said were not perceived the way I intended, and, in turn, I did not understand exactly what they were saying. What I found was a lot of bad will.'

This is not an isolated scenario but shows the major challenge in international business: the need of breaking through culture shock that inevitably occurs in international business situations.

What is culture shock?

Culture shock is the shock we experience when confronted with the unknown or the 'foreign'. Reactions to this experience can include:

- Feeling strained or frustrated because we do not understand others
- Being angry
- Becoming depressed because nothing seems to work
- Feeling helpless because we feel out of control.

The term 'culture shock' was originally created by the anthropologist Oberg to describe the effects that living in a different country or culture can have. Oberg assumed that we go through distinct phases in adapting to a foreign environment. We start in a honeymoon phase where we see everything as positive and enjoy the foreign

experience; then we plunge into a period of culture shock where we feel disoriented and helpless and may become irritated or even depressed. Gradually, we work ourselves out of this potential crisis situation and come to a recovery or gradual adaptation. This is the stage where we understand what is different from our own country and have developed a compromise between our own values and the values of the foreign counterparts. In one of my studies, I investigated the symptoms of culture shock at six months into a foreign assignment. The most frequent symptoms reported by international managers working all over the world were feeling isolated, anxiety and worrying, performance deficits and helplessness.

The culture shock triangle

Psychologically, international managers have to deal with three levels of culture shock:

- The emotional side - coping with mood swings
- The thinking side - understanding foreign colleagues
- The social side - developing a social and professional network as well as effective social skills.

This leads to a new model of culture shock, the culture shock triangle.

Emotions

International executives often report positive effects of their work on personality characteristics but also mention emotional reactions, such as worrying, feelings of isolation, anxiety and helplessness.

An extreme reaction was reported by a British manager in Shanghai:

'Culture shock - continuous feeling of being unwell due to two bouts of bad food poisoning, loneliness and, most prominent, the constant staring from the Chinese. This curiosity became very upsetting - everything in my hotel room was looked through, all drawers in my desk searched through. Also, telephone conversations were tapped, I could hear the click and the echo which does not happen now. This led to continuous paranoia. To resolve this, I eventually managed to relax and to take no notice, I pretended it did not happen and most importantly, every three to four weeks I left China to visit other countries such as Japan, Korea and Hawaii.

'Another culture shock was the physical adaptation to the pollution and the stinging eyes, the sheer noise of cars and people.

'I also felt helpless - I was deported once for not having a correct visa and had an overnight stay in a state-run guest house with a Government immigration official. So why am I here? Because it is a good career move (hopefully) for the future.'

Most people think of culture-shock

as a 'short and sharp' disorienting experience in a foreign place. Few realise that the effect of culture shock can be much deeper and more prolonged, if it is not dealt with effectively.

Psychologically, moving to a foreign country means stress for the individual. International assignments fall into the category of stress called 'life events'. Such major life changes put the individual at risk of psychological difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, alcoholism or what laymen typically call 'nervous breakdown'.

International managers who move abroad experience several such life events: changing country, changing jobs, and changing house - consequently, there is a high risk to psychological well-being and hence a high risk of performance deficits at work and, ultimately, a risk for the company. Moreover, these changes affect the entire family.

Thinking

Living in a familiar, well-structured and predictable environment makes understanding easy. The meaning of expressions, gestures and cultural norms is clear. But moving to another, maybe remote, part of the same country changes the autopilot status. We cannot take things for granted; all of sudden, it takes an effort to understand what is going on. Most importantly, we must learn new things and develop and expand our thinking.

New situations or situations that do not make automatic sense can be treated in three different ways:

- You can decide to ignore them or discard them
- You can decide to treat them as familiar situations, thereby making the wrong conclusions
- You can admit that one cannot make sense, work on it and try to expand and modify our 'typical' thinking.

The international manager can decide how to treat the 'foreign' situation and, can become:

- 1 A colonialist - you do not react to the foreign culture.
 - 2 An imperialist - forcing your own value system and way of thinking onto the new culture - not adapting in interactions and not seeing the necessity to change perceptions and attitude.
 - 3 An internationalist/inter-culturalist - you are fully aware of the complexity and ambiguity of exchanges in foreign cultures and try to adapt by changing your thinking and attitudes and by trying to find a compromise between cultures.
- Ideally, we all want to achieve the third option.

Some international managers mention 'the thinking effect' explicitly when asked about the effect of international experience on their personality:

'International work makes you more aware and more knowledgeable. The result is being able to see things from many different angles; it is a very broadening experience,' says one manager.

'The differences in attitudes were larger than I expected, but I have reached a better understanding of different attitudes towards work, ' says another.

Challenging your own assumptions and values is not the only challenging that has to be done - challenging your own identity and social behaviour is also part of building an effective international career.

Social Identity and Social Skills

This secure sense of self is disturbed by working in an 'alien' environment. The familiar context in which your own behaviour makes sense is not there.

Behaviour which is rewarded and valued at home may be negatively evaluated in the new culture. Directness and assertiveness may be positive attributes in the United States but would be seen as rude and inadequate in China. The unfamiliar influences can bring a risk to our self-identity: we are not as sure as before as to who we are and feel insecure. We learn that there are different ways of living, working, and establishing relationships and this threatens our well-formed notions on how to do things. We do not understand some of our own behaviour and the emotional ups and downs we are going through as part of our adaptation. Our self-identity is shaken-up and, in a way, we have to re-negotiate or re-define our identity, by integrating our new experiences and reactions into our 'old self'. As soon as we interact more closely with a foreign culture, we experience a conflict between our own values and those of the host culture. We experience a collision of values. As we get more and more involved, we normally develop alternative ways of behaving and this also influences our view of ourselves.

Similar to what we have seen with understanding others, our sense of self has to be expanded and modified. This is part of the self-development most people go through during international assignments.

The positive effect of international work on self-development is illustrated in the following comment:

'My most positive surprise was to realise that I was a born survivor and that I could deal with problems. It was very good for my self image and I learned that I had a lot of staying power.'

Business and Pleasure

Germans take a structured approach to business: they negotiate in conference rooms and they may have a meal with the negotiation partners once the deal is clinched. They take a highly situation specific approach to business - a clear divide between business and pleasure. Chinese businessmen in Singapore meet a business partner over lunch or dinner and, if it is really important, at home. They try to get to know the person first before any business is discussed.

Different countries have different approaches towards combining business and pleasure. This requires the individual manager to adapt to the setting of the specific country and, if necessary, to develop the social skills to deal with the new business scenario. In my experience, Western managers need some time to adapt to the combined 'business and pleasure' approach in Asian or South American countries. The introvert or socially reserved manager, who finds it easy to work in structured business situations, is at a loss at cocktail parties or dinners where the conversation is not focused on business issues but on how good their golf is. Similarly, some Western

business practices (North American or Northern European) may be difficult for executives who come from a more diffuse culture, such as Asia. The highly structured way of doing business in the US may be seen as curt, disrespectful, and down-right aggressive.

No 'do's and dont's'

Going beyond mechanistic 'do's and don'ts', it is more important to develop an attitude and the behaviour that is comfortable and effective for the individual manager in the new business culture.

The culture shock triangle provides concrete steps in dealing with international business, from balancing your emotions to developing effective social behavior.