

Culture shock



Culture shock refers to the cycle of heightened excitement, despondency and depression before reaching adjustment when living and working in a different culture. It can seriously affect the mental and physical health of assignees and their families.

HONEYMOON

When people live and work abroad, they typically experience a honeymoon period when they are delighted to have arrived and are excited about their new adventure. While individuals might feel a sense of elation, they are not necessarily at their most productive. Although there is no defined timescale as everybody is different, this phase typically lasts for around four to six weeks.

DESPONDENCY

Reality then sets in as individuals have to perform at work, children must settle into new schools and spouses/partners must have a structure to their lives. At this point, living in the new culture can feel difficult. This can lead to feelings of loss of confidence and of capability leading to a period of despondency and disenchantment. This period again varies from person to person but is thought to last for around six months.

DEPRESSION

At its lowest point, a sense of depression can set in as assignees and family members feel unable to cope. This can lead to inappropriate coping mechanisms being employed which can lead to alcoholism and drug dependency. Marriage breakdowns can also occur.

At this lowest point, assignees can retreat into their own cultural ghettos as trying to understand and work with locals becomes too difficult due to lack of cultural understanding. Assignees may give up on their assignments and elect to return home early.

CULTURAL MASTERY

Individuals and families do usually recover from the low point in the culture shock cycle by employing appropriate coping mechanisms, leading to cultural adjustment. At this point they feel settled, competent and capable of operating effectively in their new culture, having achieved a sense of mastery. This can take up to a year after arrival in the host country culture.

MANAGING CULTURE SHOCK

Understanding the culture shock cycle is important because people are not going to be fully productive before they have culturally adjusted. It is also important to

remember that everyone is different and will adapt in different periods of time. Not everyone will experience the cycle in the same way; some may not experience the honeymoon stage but feel despondent or depressed early on.

Organisations need to consider the effects of culture shock on performance management and take into account cultural adaptation in their appraisal processes. Organisations should consider the assignment types being used. Assignees on short-term assignments may not reach cultural mastery until the end of their assignment.

TRAINING

As well as cross-cultural training, organisations can include culture shock training in their preparatory programmes. When people know what to expect, they are better able to prepare coping strategies to manage their culture shock feelings.

Employees should receive stress management training such that they are able to recognise stress symptoms and develop coping mechanisms.

Preventative and remedial measures such as counselling, stress management programmes, and the provision of stress breaks can be helpful. Mentors and buddies can aid adjustment.

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