

Culture Shock: A Friend or a Foe?



The name suggests that culture shock is definitely something to be frowned upon. If not the devil itself visiting you in the form of utter frustration, rage with anger, feeling at a loss or a total failure. Or else you might think that 'they are all stupid' and the other culture is nonsense altogether. You could even develop headaches, insomnia or nausea as a result of culture shock, when it really kicks in. And in this case you still have managed to stay 'healthy'.

At times like this you tend to forget that it was you who decided to accept a foreign assignment in a subsidiary of your multinational company in order to be a global player on the international stage. Or it was you who applied for the Erasmus programme for your university year or just went to learn a foreign language in its native environment.

Although in the latter scenario, a few weeks abroad for language improvement do not usually cause all the symptoms of culture shock at its worst. This normally stops at the so-called 'honeymoon phase'.

It was Kalvero Oberg in 1960, who first identified the process and determined 5 different stages of culture shock. He took it as a kind of illness with a cause, symptoms and a cure.

So what is culture shock at the end of the day?

Culture Shock is the emotional, cognitive and behavioural reaction to moving to live, study or work in another culture for a longer period of time. It is a typical and normal reaction to difference. It happens in an environment with different customs, norms and values. And it is the norms and values that cause the most trouble when you bump into them.

Strictly speaking the notion was invented for expatriates. But in a wider context we may experience the same or very similar symptoms when e.g. we get incorporated into another family by marriage or join a new company. A very similar process takes place when, for a longer period, we interact with any set of people, whose habits, customs and norms are different from our own. Especially if those behaviours originate from a quite different set of value system. So we can probably say that we experience phases of culture shock in as a reaction to **OTHERNESS**, when we are cut off from familiar cultural patterns and we are stretched out of our comfort zone.

A lot of times we feel like a fish out of water. The culture we have grown up with is like water to fish. We have grown up with our culture and we are so used to it, that we only notice it when we are no longer in it.

Our culture helps to shape our identity. Many of the cues of interpersonal communication (words, idioms and slang, body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice etc.) are different in different cultures. One of the

reasons that we feel like a fish out of water when we enter a new culture, is that we do not know all the cues that are used in the new culture. We may feel deprived of our cosy setting, where we can read the cues and where our 'normal' ways work. And then we have funny reactions, so that we even surprise ourselves at times. Obviously not all the people experience culture shock in the same way. The reactions and symptoms greatly depend on our personality, previous experiences, attitudes, knowledge and our skills.

But the whole process has shown a lot of similarities among people who have participated in the many researches on the subject since the 1960-ies.

Now that we have looked at the cause, let's see the different phases.

1. The honeymoon phase

It is first exposure to the new environment, which you have chosen in most cases for a good reason. You are excited: there are new sights sounds, new smells and tastes. Things are interesting and people are unusual in a good way. The newcomer may have problems, but at this stage he usually accepts them as just part of the newness. He may take it as a challenge and the challenges are not so many in number or the problems not so too difficult to tackle.

As an expatriate you may find that "the red carpet" has been rolled out and you may be taken to restaurants and tours of the sights.

Typically you get as far as that in the culture shock process when you go on a holiday or a short language study trip. You usually leave with good memories.

2. The rejection phase

Unfortunately, the honeymoon phase often comes to an end fairly soon in case you stay for longer. The newcomer has to deal with transportation problems (buses that don't come on time), shopping problems (cannot buy their favourite foods) or communication problems. It may start to seem like people no longer care about your problems. They may help, but they don't seem to understand your concern over what they see as small problems. You might even start to think that the people in the host country don't like foreigners.

So before you notice, you are well into the second, so-called rejection phase.

The newcomer may begin to feel aggressive and start to complain about the host culture. It is important to recognize that these feelings are real and can become serious. This phase is a kind of crisis in the culture shock process. It is called the 'rejection' phase because it is at this point that the newcomer starts to reject the host country, complaining about and noticing only the bad things that bother them. At this stage the newcomer either stays, sticks it out and works himself out of this phase, hopefully getting some external support as well, or his state becomes worse and goes home physically, mentally or both.

This phase is characterised by a person's inability to work effectively, so it is to be watched out for, if you are an HR person or a manager responsible for the newcomer to the company. This is when you want to offer support, often in terms of intercultural training or coaching.

And if you are the unfortunate sufferer, it is the time for enhanced self-awareness, trying to keep a balance of emotions and monitor and deliberately change your thinking.

If that does not happen, you may soon find yourself in stage 3.

3. The regression phase

In this phase of culture shock, people want to spend much of their time speaking their own language with people from their own culture, tend to watch videos from their home country, eat food from home. One may spend most of this time complaining about the host country and culture.

You may only remember the good things about your home country Your homeland may suddenly seem marvellously wonderful; all the difficulties that you had there are forgotten and you may find yourself wondering why you ever left. You may now only remember your home culture as a wonderful place in which nothing ever went wrong for you. Of course, this is not true, but an illusion created by your culture shock.

This stage can potentially become very harmful and requires careful attention of both the newcomer and their HR in a corporate environment. For people with serious symptoms it is advisable to seek professional help and see a psychologist.

You might skip this stage altogether or just show occasional symptoms depending on your personality, experience and emotional intelligence. But it is a good thing to be well aware.

4. The recovery phase

In this stage you become more comfortable with the customs of the host country. You can now move around without a feeling of anxiety. You still have problems with some of the social cues and you may still not understand everything going on around you. Now you may even find yourself preferring some things in the host country to things at home. You have now understood that there are different ways to live your life and that no way is really better than another, just different. There are different ways to deal with the problems life poses. Finally, you have become comfortable in the new place. You are now adjusting to the new culture.

Some researchers talk about the integration phase as the next stage. In this final stage you are still a foreigner to the land originally, but now you understand and accept the culture and have developed alternative ways of thinking and behaving in it. Emotionally living in the host culture is no longer more stressful, than for the people for whom it is their home culture!

5. Reverse culture shock

Much later, you may find yourself returning to your homeland and - guess what? -you may find yourself entering the fifth phase of culture shock. This is called "reverse culture shock" or "return culture shock" and occurs when you return home. You have been away for a long time, becoming comfortable with the habits

and customs of a new lifestyle and you may find that you are no longer completely comfortable in your home country. Many things may have changed while you were away and it may take a little while to become at ease with the cues and signs and symbols of your home culture.

Reverse culture shock can be even more difficult than your initial culture shock. It is important to remember that not everyone experiences all the phases of culture shock and especially not all to the same degree. It depends on your personality, attitude and skills as well as your awareness all the way through the process.

In the first place it is vital to have awareness and knowledge about your own culture.

Actually experiencing culture shock with self-awareness and working yourself through it can give you far better adjustment chances. This way you can make culture shock your friend. Listen to the symptoms and act accordingly.

Apart from your own personal resources there are trainings that can help. Cultural awareness trainings can give you a lot of insight into the way how your own cultural identity has been formed and what happens when you meet another culture. It can enhance your cultural sensitivity.

Intercultural communication trainings offer primarily useful skills in the form of simulation and other type of activities to develop your cultural competence. Before you go on an international assignment it is very useful to receive pre-departure training to prepare you in advance for the particular culture. After you have entered the target country in-country briefing can give you a lot of essential knowledge to move around with.

Relocation trainings can support you in doing business successfully.

International managers will become much more effective if they understand the host country's way of doing things: such as different ways of interacting and communicating, different approaches to managing, authority and effective teamwork. The earlier the better.

Repatriation trainings give you preparation for the homecoming, unexpectedly the most stressful phase of culture shock.

There is another opportunity at hand in terms of coaching, and there are now coaches in Hungary specializing in the intercultural field.

There is a risk of sickness or emotional problems in many of the phases of culture shock. Remember to be kind to yourself all the time when you are away and when you get home. Give yourself time to adjust. Be your own best friend. If you do these things you will be a much stronger person.

And then you can say that you have made culture shock a friend from an initial enemy.