



# Book Breaking Through Culture Shock

## What You Need to Succeed in International Business

Elisabeth Marx

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### Recommendation

Indonesians aren't punctual, but the Germans believe timeliness is a sign of respect. The French are well educated, but elitist. And, spouses and children don't always find living abroad to be a "grand experience." Those are just some of the things you'll learn from Dr. Elisabeth Marx, who explores why many managers have a horrible time abroad. To help improve your managerial experience overseas, she provides a 100-plus item checklist of what to do before you leave for a foreign country, including information on whether to sell your house or have your children inoculated. Her book tells the ambitious manager Everything You Always Wanted To Know About the International Experience but Were Afraid to Ask. For instance - and this isn't surprising considering her background in psychology - she tells corporations to provide psychological testing for employees before sending them to international posts. *BooksInShort* says read this before you plan your bon voyage party.

### Take-Aways

- International duty is a minefield that most managers don't cross successfully.
- You have to think differently to succeed in a foreign culture.
- Managers should anticipate some form of culture shock.
- Spouses and children can complicate the experience of working abroad.
- Attitude may be more important than memorizing mannerisms.
- Learn the language of the country that you're in, even if your language is spoken commonly.
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- To assure that a manager from your company has a successful experience abroad, guarantee the manager a job when he or she gets back.
- Business customs differ widely. For example, the French have long workdays because they take two or three hour business lunches.
- Most companies have vast room for improvement in how they prepare their workers for duties abroad.

# Summary

## What is Culture Shock

Culture shock is the experience of foreignness. Adapting to this experience, or failing to adapt, is a major professional challenge in international business. Whereas some executives clearly thrive on this challenge, others feel disoriented and anxious and do not perform well.

## Why Some Succeed and Some Fail

Why are some international managers successful while others struggle with day-to-day activities? Air miles or technical excellence have nothing to do with it. The ability to manage culture shock in international business makes a difference between failure and success. Culture shock is a reality in today's global business. Some managers adapt, others desperately cling to their habits and their national approaches. If you are - or are about to be - a manager in an international setting, you can use this book as a self-coaching guide. First, you have to take an active approach to answering three questions:

1. How can you adapt effectively to the demands of international work?
2. How can you motivate an international team and understand your foreign colleagues?
3. And how should your international career be managed in the long run?

## Culture Shock and Adaptation

Like most people, you can be effective internationally if you put real effort into developing your adaptive ability. A new culture can produce a variety of reactions, which include: confusion about what to do, anxiety, frustration, exhilaration, inappropriate social behavior, an inability to get close to your business counterparts and clinch the deals you want, a feeling of isolation and depression. "All of these are possible reactions to culture shock, the shock we experience when we are confronted with the unknown and the foreign."

"It is estimated that one in seven U.K. managers fail on international assignments and this figure is even higher for U.S. managers, with an estimated failure rate of 25% to 40%."

It is not true that experiencing culture shock is negative, or a sign of weakness. International managers should expect to deal with three psychological levels of culture shock:

- Emotions - Coping with mood swings.
- Thinking - Understanding foreign colleagues.
- Social skills and identity - Developing a social and professional network and effective social skills.

"Some managers seem to adapt in almost chameleon-like way to different countries, whereas others cling desperately to their habits and their national approaches."

## You can take these 10 steps to minimize your culture shock:

- Don't be surprised by culture shock.
- Understand that culture shock can happen irrespective of location.
- As soon as you arrive in your new location, identify all the opportunities you can find to build support networks with other international managers and local people.
- As with any stressful situation, fight it, don't give in to it. Don't try to escape by overeating or drinking.
- Ask other international managers for guidance and advice about problems.
- Give yourself time to adapt.
- Don't hesitate to seek professional psychological help if problems persist.

- When you come home, expect the same symptoms to reoccur. Reverse culture shock is normal.
- Concentrate on the positive aspects of culture shock.
- Keep a sense of humor!

## Thinking Differently

The international manager's biggest challenge is learning to understand the new culture. To work well as a manager abroad, you must embrace the idea of cultural relativism, that is, the idea that there is no absolute right or wrong - that no one approach is best. You need to acknowledge that varied approaches can be effective, depending on cultural context. One important component of breaking through culture shock is being able to change methods according to your situation.

“It is a myth that experiencing culture shock is a weakness or a negative indication of future international success. Culture shock in all its diverse forms is completely normal and is a part of a successful process of adaptation.”

To get results abroad, you can't apply narrow, black-and-white categories to issues that arise. You have to develop different ways of looking at situations. This requires, among other things, a strong knowledge, of (your) own culture and individual preferences. And what if you choose not to adopt an attitude of cultural relativism? Then you are likely to react badly to pressure, using responses that may be ethnocentric, mono-cultural and inappropriate. The cross-cultural manager should work to manage predictable stress and culture shock, and should search for and apply culturally adaptive solutions. You have to think across cultures.

## Understanding Business Cultures

Different countries have different cultures and offer different realities. For example, note this brief comparison among countries. Germany offers a well-educated workforce, a broad middle class, hierarchical structures and a long-term view. Germans do not like to mix business with pleasure. France offers a strong educational system, a well-educated workforce, a hierarchical system and the two-to-three-hour business lunch. You may find a possible lack of diversity because of the elite system. The United States offers a moderately good education system - though many state schools and universities don't achieve a high quality - no strong focus on foreign languages, a high failure rate of managers abroad and a highly individualistic system which makes real teamwork difficult. China offers few well-educated managers or general employees and a society where developing the right connections is important. And, for both historic and economic reasons, leisure time is not as valued as it is elsewhere.

## Managing Your Career Successfully

You should think about several specific issues before you judge whether or not you could make it as an international manager. A successful stint abroad has many benefits: greater confidence, more open-mindedness, more tolerance and patience, and a broader outlook. Positive benefits also include faster professional development, more responsibility and more marketability. Successful managers abroad are able to reserve judgment, are not absolute in their evaluations and learn to be flexible. Furthermore, working abroad, you are more likely to realize that some things can't be objectified and are beyond rationality. You can also gain the ability to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity, and ultimately develop curiosity and flexibility in your thinking.

“Some researchers have concluded that marriage is a liability to those working overseas. There are many cases where relationships drift apart.”

For a successful international career, be proactive in getting international experience, choose assignments carefully, assess what you need from your organization, get tax advice, find a mentor, and ask for management development and cross-cultural training. Engage in self-development activities, such as reading about your new location and learning the language.

## Role Models: International High Flyers

We all want to know how successful international executives broke through the culture shock and managed their careers. One way to find out is to seek role models, such as international managers like Peter Job, the chief executive of Reuters, Walter Hasselkus, the former CEO of Rover and Win Bischoff, the chairman of Schrodgers. These men have experience with top companies and had successful international careers before becoming their firm's chief executive.

## **Peter Job, Chief Executive, Reuters**

Peter Job believes that managers abroad shouldn't underestimate each others' abilities and should avoid the propensity to think negatively about foreign nations. He believes that the personal element that is always present when you downgrade others puts you on a bad footing with potential partners because it shows a lack of respect and bars you from learning more about other cultures. He offers these suggestions:

- Since attitudes are more important than manners, focus more on challenging your personal attitudes and values than on learning an appropriate greeting style.
- Superficial cultural training is not sufficient.
- Making do with resources and learning to adapt are necessary. You have to leave your baggage at home and deal with the situation as it is, and not as you would like it to be.
- Strike a balance between headquarters and the periphery.

## **Win Bischoff, Chairman, Schroders**

Win Bischoff believes in learning the language of the country you're going to live in, and notes, "Language skills can definitely give you an edge, even if business is conducted in English" or your native tongue, whatever that may be. To further your international career, Bischoff says you need:

- The ability to listen to advice from senior execs and trust their opinions.
- Flexibility, plus the ability to handle new tasks.
- An assignment, ideally of four or five years duration. To achieve a real understanding of a foreign culture or market, one obviously needs more than a couple of months - particularly in more complex jobs.
- Adaptability, which should not be confused with lack of firmness and direction.
- Clear direction and follow through.

## **Walter Hasselkus, former CEO, Rover Group**

Walter Hasselkus believes that there is no clear recipe for international success. He explains, "Different leaders are successful with different styles." You should use a style that fits your personality. If your style is inconsistent, you will lose credibility. He notes:

- Even the most able English speakers may feel helpless in a situation where their vocabulary is not as developed as that of their colleagues in the host country.
- Coming into a new foreign operation tests the ultimate ability of a successful international leader.
- Young trainees should get noticed by doing exceptional work and should gain early management experience by heading a smaller enterprise.

## **Best Practices**

The best practices for companies employing managers in international business include:

- Careful personnel selection - This includes systemic use of international competencies, systemic use of psychological testing and an interview with the spouse at the selection stage.
- Thorough preparation and training - This includes offers of look-see visits, language training and cultural training.
- Ongoing support - This includes a mentor system and headquarters feedback.
- Solid repatriation - This includes the guarantee of a job upon returning.

“Most companies are fully aware that an important factor in international expansion and competitiveness is the development of effective institutional managers. Yet many assignments are failures: managers don't adapt overseas, families have problems with their new lifestyles, there are differences in negotiations and in joint ventures.”

Unfortunately, companies very seldom adhere to these best practices, so they have a lot of room for improvement. This lack of good

selection, preparation, training, support, and repatriation explains why so many international management experiences end badly.

## About the Author

Dr. **Elizabeth Marx** is a director of Norman Broadbent International, a worldwide executive search company. She focuses on the search for and the psychological development of international executives and carries out research on boardroom issues. Based in London, she works throughout Europe and the United States, and lectures internationally on management topics. She trained in psychology at the University of Marburg, gained her doctorate at Oxford University and was previously a lecturer in psychology at the National University of Singapore.

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