



15 April 2011

Cultural Adaptability: Six Key Points from Recent Research

1. Adapting to another culture is about finding a fit between the sort of person you are and the new environment.
2. This process is similar to the way you adjust to other critical life transitions, such as leaving home, the end of a relationship, a new job, or bereavement. All of these are disruptive transitions that can affect you profoundly.
3. What is experienced as an obstacle in a new culture can vary from person to person. So accurate self-knowledge is invaluable.
4. Quite intense frustration reactions can be common. These can show as physical or psychological symptoms.
5. Learning some quite new skills and behaviours are usually required but some obstacles don't go away, even when you have more skills.
6. The outcome of cultural adaptation can be an expanded sense of self and a greater confidence in your ability to rise to a challenge and achieve a goal that matters to you.

WANTED: PROFESSIONALS WHO CAN WORK ACROSS CULTURES!

The vexed question of suitability for an international role

A major financial services firm was seeking someone from the Sydney office to go to China and head up the Mergers and Acquisition team there, managing day to day staff performance and the interface between Chinese and Australian clients. Mark Gibson was selected for the role because he was clearly one of the firm's rising talents and had already proved himself in a number of challenging Australian projects, where he had substantially increased the firm's profits. It was assumed that a good manager in Australia would be a good manager overseas. Prior to the China assignment, Mark was given some literature to read on the plane, covering China's geography, economics and politics, as well as its legal and banking situation.

From day one, Mark found China and the Chinese confusing! Even things with his team didn't go well. In his very first meeting, Mark introduced the priorities he felt they needed to address but then there was complete silence. He couldn't get any discussion going. Finally, in desperation, he put a proposal on the table. It was immediately accepted and the meeting broke up soon after. Things went downhill from there really. Mark found it hard to know whether he had secured commitment and even harder to get to the bottom of some of the long standing issues he had been sent to China to tackle. Within months, his confidence had eroded and his stress levels rose daily. Worse still, the firm began to lose market share to a competitor and their most promising Chinese employee defected to the opposition.

What went wrong?

Why was Mark, someone with a proven track record in the firm's Sydney office, such a dismal failure when he was sent to China? Mark Gibson's experience is by no means unique. Many studies show that the failure rate of people on international assignments can be as high as 30%, where 'failure' is defined as sub-optimal performance. 'Casualties' such as Mark, represent significant costs to their organisation, setting back strategic goals by months and damaging key relationships. Failures of this type are also destructive of an individual's self-esteem. Those chosen for challenging international assignments tend to be ambitious high-achievers, used to feeling competent and in control. Their inability to deliver in a culturally complex setting can shake their confidence and be deeply unsettling.

What makes some people highly effective while others seem to struggle, perform poorly and even cut short an assignment to return home? The answer seems to be the individual's ability to adapt to a situation where their familiar, tried and true, ways of operating simply don't yield the same results.

The cause of such problems

It's often assumed that a high performing executive at home will also be a top performer in another culture. Or that someone with outstanding technical and professional skills will be the right person for a role here in Australia which involves considerable interaction across cultures. But this isn't necessarily the case.

It's unfortunately true that most Australian organisations continue to base their selection decisions on technical competence alone. They don't assess cultural adaptability and they don't invest in cultural competence programs. A recent survey revealed that only 60% of Australian organisations offered their staff any kind of cultural awareness training and, in most cases, the training provided was so minimal and of such variable quality that its usefulness was questionable.

What can be done to minimise the risk of failure?

A thorough selection process together with proper preparation makes all the difference. Both these help to ensure that the person you put in a culturally demanding role is more likely to adjust and adapt. Operating across cultural boundaries should be a rewarding experience for the individual and the organisation they represent. Such people acquire the kind of cultural competency that is in increasing demand across all sectors in our globalised economy.

What sort of person tends to thrive?

There are certain personal attributes that have been found to correlate with professional effectiveness, both in international assignments and in working within Australia with people from other cultural backgrounds. One of these, for example, is perceptiveness. Perceptive people notice others' needs and concerns. They are empathetic and aware of different perspectives. They observe how they are coming across to others and are also able to pick up on the subtle clues, cues and signals other people may communicate, even unconsciously.

Adaptation as a continuous cycle

A social environment is never static and there's always a new cultural challenge that requires a reaction on our part. It's through these reactions and our ability to reflect on them that we continually build deeper levels of cultural competence, beyond an initial training program. As we penetrate deeper into a new culture, our responses need to become more sophisticated. The culturally adaptable professional develops the habit of posing questions to themselves. What worked well and what worked less well? What will I do differently next time? What have I learned about this culture that I didn't know before? How well did I manage my own emotions today? This investigative attitude leads to success!