

Cultural Adjustment: Embracing Your Journey Abroad

by Winston Sieck - August 19, 2017

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“You’re such an American!”

In the U.S., those are words you’re proud to hear, they bolster your pride and patriotic spirit. When you hear them uttered in another country, though, those four little words can really sting.

There is a substantial difference between visiting a place to experience the culture, and actually living there where you are immersed in it. When you plunge all the way in, the cultural adjustment can be tricky.

Yet, your enjoyment and professional success depend on [how well and how fully you can adapt to the local culture](#).

Mark Mendenhall and Gary Oddou reviewed empirical studies on the cultural adjustment of managers who lived overseas. They uncovered several factors that helped these expats adapt to their new life abroad. Their now classic [paper](#) describing key aspects of expatriate cultural adjustment is published in *Academy of Management Review*.

Here are 6 ways uncovered from seasoned expat managers to help you smoothly and confidently adapt to the ambiance of your new cultural scene.

Find substitutes for your fun activities

This cultural adjustment practice involves substituting favorite or pleasing activities that are experienced in your home culture with similar ones in the host culture.

There are certain activities and events that are consistent among all cultures, certain values that all cultures share, such as history, art, food, sports, family, dance, and music.

The specific items included in these basic categories vary across cultures. For instance, an American at home may enjoy football, classic rock, and hot dogs. Along those same lines, under those categories, the host culture may value soccer, traditional folk music, and curry.

Substituting your host culture’s favored activities for fun things you do at home can provide you with a more organic immersion in the host culture. A side advantage is that the [ongoing cultural learning](#) can even help you become more creative.

Find ways to reduce your stress

There’s no way around it. Entering into a new culture is going to be stressful. And the more different the

culture is from what you're used to, the more difficult it's going to be to adjust.

In their review, Mendenhall and Oddou found that the better able the expats were to manage their stress levels, the easier it was for them to adjust and adapt to the host culture.

There is a huge adjustment for people as they attempt to form relationships, both personal and professional, and engage in [interpersonal communications](#) that are vastly different from what they are accustomed to. This uncertainty and pressure often results in loneliness, frustration, anxiety, and depression.

Yet, you can cope. Whether it's deep breathing, long walks in the woods, or reading romantic novels, figure out what calms you down and keep it top of mind. Actively find ways to reduce your stress, so you can more easily make the necessary social adaptations to fully integrate into your host culture.

Draw on your professional strengths

Professionals who take overseas assignments are expected to accomplish specific work-related tasks. Ideally, their work is related to their specialized knowledge and area of expertise. The research shows that the more confident the expats are in their ability to accomplish their work, the easier their time making the cultural adjustment.

When you first arrive, you're relearning the basics of how to live and socialize again. To flatten your learning curve, you'll want to fall back on your technical know-how.

Reach out and build relationships

Humans are inherently social. We need relationships in order to survive.

The studies Mendenhall and Oddou reviewed showed that when managers are thrust into new cultures, their ability to develop lasting, solid friendships is essential for successfully adjusting. This ability is a critical aspect of [cross-cultural competence](#), in general.

Before any of that can happen, you'll need to be willing to communicate. Even when communication is bumpier and more awkward than what you're used to. If you tend towards introversion, you'll need to psych yourself up a bit and push yourself into situations where communication happens naturally.

Actively seeking connections does more than satisfy your need for relationships.

It also helps you learn the culture and adapt more quickly. As you approach others, you turn up native guides who'll be happy to show you the ropes. This is huge for learning appropriate behaviors and understanding the nuances of the new culture.

Use bumps to dig deeper into the culture

When you start talking and interacting with cultural others, you're bound to hit bumps in the road.

You have to expect that some anxiety and uncertainty will arise in intercultural relations. The key is to try to prevent misunderstandings regarding local behaviors that result in unnecessary conflict.

The researchers found that an important aspect of cultural adjustment is attempting to understand why the locals behave the way they do. This isn't a one-time thing, but rather an ongoing practice.

Doing so helps you better fit in with the culture. It also enhances your ability to [take the perspective of people from your host culture](#), and predict their future behaviors.

To adjust more readily, find ways to seek out information regarding the beliefs and customs of the culture.

With this inquisitive stance, you'll experience a more relaxed approach to interactions, and better appreciate the behaviors of others.

You're a hero (but don't overdo it)

A hard truth of cultural adaptation is that some cultures are more difficult to adjust to than others. Tough cultures present you with more frustration and headache as you try to integrate yourself into the social fabric.

Mendenhall and Oddou found that the specific country or location to which an expatriate is assigned was at least partly related to how well they adjust. In some of the more challenging cultures, the expatriates experienced higher levels of anxiety and depression.

This exacerbates the already difficult task of adjusting to the new culture. The so-called "thicker skin" that some people have makes them somewhat impervious to what certain cultures consider rude or rough. Saving them from succumbing to difficulties.

To manage this issue, figure out what you've got before you seize an opportunity. Study up on the culture enough to evaluate how well you'll fit in.

If it looks like a challenging match, you need to be a little self-aware. Do you have the thick skin you'll need to better handle a harsher cultural environment?

If not, perhaps pass on that kind of assignment, in favor of something a little easier.

Keeping Calm and Adjusting to a New Culture

It takes more than just your regular job skills to be successful in an overseas placement. But that doesn't mean you have to stress over your ability to adapt to the new culture.

As your adventure abroad draws near, it's easy to get wrapped up in your destination and forget about yourself. Pull back and create some space for yourself. Turn your attention inward to strengthen and boost your self-confidence, self-esteem, and mental wellbeing.

Then, push yourself out to form new bonds, learning as you go, and enjoying the experience of a lifetime.

Image Credit: [Steven Lewis](#)

Mark Mendenhall, & Gary Oddou (1985). The Dimensions of Expatriate Acculturation: A Review
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