

FACING THE CULTURE SHOCK

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ABSTRACT

While 89% of companies formally assess a candidate's job skills prior to a foreign posting, less than half go through the same process for cultural suitability. Even fewer gauge whether the family will cope. Enthusiasm and excitement, withdrawal / loneliness, re-emergence, adjustment / achievement are the stages of cultural shock. The symptoms of cultural shock are stress, anger, and inability to work, boredom and lethargy. The factors that affect cultural shock are training, demographic characteristics, personality characteristics, organizational support and technical competence. Pre-departure visit, pre-departure cross-cultural training, and post-arrival training are very critical for an expatriate to reduce cultural shock. The Japanese expatriates experience significantly fewer incidences of failure as they send abroad managers who are far better prepared and more adept at working and flourishing in a foreign environment. The success is largely attributable to training programs and an intelligent planning by the human resource management staff. An expatriate with previous international experience would generally know, what to expect when relocating and adjusting to a new country and culture. The degree of uncertainty and cultural shock may be lesser for them. India, a country known for its diversity, versatility and its uniqueness may definitely exemplify an intricate country for any foreigner to understand the cultural nuances at one go. The challenge for any expatriate is to succeed by understanding the business, culture, traditions, values and most importantly the behavior of the people of India.

Key words:

Cultural Shock, Expatriate, Training, International Experience, Personality

INTRODUCTION

“Deep cultural undercurrents structure life in subtle but highly consistent ways that are not consciously formulated. Like the invisible jet streams in the skies that determine the course of a storm, these currents shape our lives; yet, their influence is only beginning to be identified.”

----Edward T. Hall (1976)

In this boundary less world, any country is free to trade anywhere. This deregulation has brought in the advantage of making a country a well developed nation within a short span of time, but it also has the adverse effect of ruthless competition, which terrorizes with a siren -- “innovate or perish”. The growing number of multi national companies (MNC) in a country demands the human resource department to be specialized not only on their core functions (like recruitment and selection, staffing, performance appraisal, training and development, compensation and labor relations), but also on strategizing and managing employees globally. Human resource management (HRM) is more regarded as the staffing function, where it used to be isolated from the company’s plans and goals. Traditional HRM is now strategic human resource management (SHRM), which is proactive, people oriented and plays an integrated role in formulating and executing human resource policies and practices to achieve the strategic aims of the organization.

With the advent of globalization, the HR department faces the challenge of staffing people in cross-border transaction, as they should be talented in understanding the cultural nuances of the destination country. Though, every employer is aware of providing adequate training for an individual before experiencing an alien culture, only 26% of expatriate candidates are provided cross-cultural communication preparation. Research shows that 83% of companies experience expatriate failure, and 86% attribute failure to candidate selection and the inability to adapt to host cultures. While 89% of companies formally assess a candidate’s job skills prior to a foreign posting, only less than half go through the same process for cultural suitability. Even fewer gauge whether the family will cope.

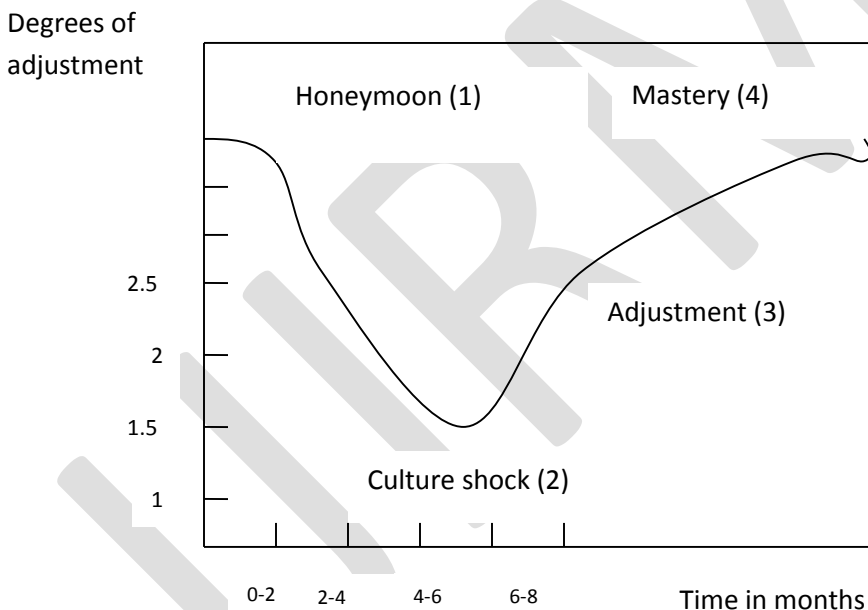
Companies often assign employees to new job assignments in different areas to provide them with invaluable breadth of experience. However, not many companies succeed in its endeavors as they think. If the “X-patriates”, who are the ‘X’ in his own motherland, is experiencing a huge difference between his home country culture and the host country culture,

then it would be very difficult for him to acclimatize with the country. These employees experience *Cultural Shock* when they get exposed to a new job location. It is a feeling of confusion, insecurity and anxiety caused by a strange environment. They are very much concerned about not knowing how to act.

Employees in MNCs receive job assignments in a new country, or, they may be required to collaborate with people of different countries. Their initial interaction with each other itself may result in culture shock because of the differences perceived, starting from greeting each other, developing trust and confidence, negotiating and finally bagging the deal.

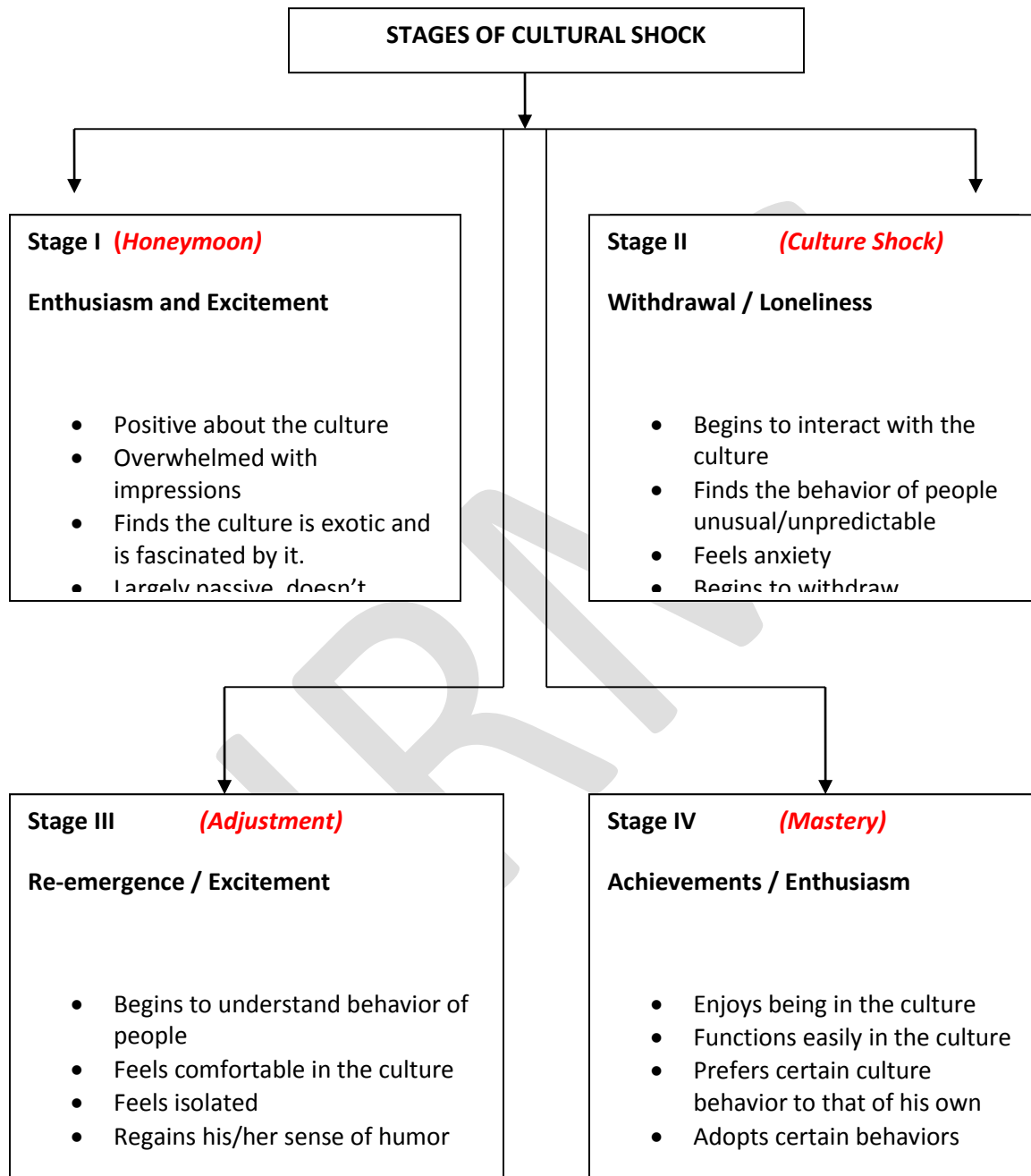
The following diagram reflects the stages of culture shock.

Fig. 1 - U Curve Theory of Adjustment



The stages can be further elaborated in the following diagram:

Fig. 2 - The diagram above describes each stage of cultural shock.



SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE SHOCK

Homesickness, boredom, lethargy, withdrawal, irritability, hostility towards local people, anger, excessive sleeping, inability to work, stress within the family are the common symptoms of culture shock.

CRITICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPATRIATE CULTURAL SHOCK

A person may encounter culture shock not only because of his lack of exposure to a foreign country, but, demographic characteristics of the expatriate, personality characteristics, training acquired, organizational support and technical competence are some of the other factors which may influence culture shock

1. Demographic characteristics

Research has demonstrated that various demographic characteristics of the expatriates are related to the degree of cultural shock. A review of literature reveals that the expatriates' family status, age and gender, amount of previous international experience, are demographic factors that affect expatriate cultural shock.

It is widely accepted among researchers that **family status** is invariably the most important demographic characteristic. It was observed that younger pre-school aged children facilitated adjustment while older children inhibited adjustment, thus increasing the likelihood of cultural shock. A 1992 survey of 50 *Fortune* 500 companies by International Orientation Resources (IOR), suggested that the majority of expatriate failures, 60% in fact, occurred because of family difficulties. A 1994 Foreign Trade Council report found that 80% of employees refused international positions due to family reasons. A spouse's career is also recognized as a growing reason for rejection because of women's increased participation in raising a family. 90% of all expatriates are male and 78% are married. Despite the apparent importance of the family, less than half of the MNCs interviewed the spouse in the expatriate selection process.

There is no empirical evidence to support the fact that **Gender and age** contributes to cultural shock. The reason could be that majority of the expatriates are male (90-97%).

Expatriates over the age of 45 were significantly less likely to leave their international assignments earlier than their younger counterparts. That is, expatriates who had been with an

organization for a longer period of time may simply be more willing to 'stick it out' than younger expatriates with less tenure with the organization.

An expatriate with **previous international experience** would generally know, what to expect when relocating and adjusting to a new country and culture. The degree of uncertainty and cultural shock may be lesser for them.

2. Personality characteristics

A study was conducted by the National Foreign Trade Council of New York, a non-profit organization formed to promote export expansion and Selection Research International (SRI), a consulting firm that assists organizations in the selection and training of expatriates. Out of 52 Fortune 500 companies surveyed, only eight had any mechanism in place that considered the core personality traits and competencies that made for successful expatriates. Research has demonstrated that certain core personality traits and competencies can result in an increased likelihood that individuals will be negatively affected by cultural shock. Key traits identified to reduce culture shock are Cultural flexibility, ethnocentricity, stress reactions, interpersonal and relational skills, and a willingness to communicate.

3. Training

Preparation for training and cross-cultural interaction is critical. An expatriate experiences the honeymoon stage on his entry into a foreign destination. This stage fades away soon and the reality will be set. If an employer is able to provide adequate training at this stage, cross-cultural shock can be overcome. Even though cross-cultural training has proven to be effective, less than a third of expatriates are given such training. The rationale for this lack of training is an assumption that managerial skills and processes are universal. In a simplistic way, a manager's domestic track record is used as the major selection criterion for an overseas assignment. Generally expatriates are allowed a pre-departure visit, pre-departure cross-cultural training and post arrival training to surmount cultural shock

Pre-departure visit is a common type of orientation activity where the expatriate visits the host country before the formal job begins. The intent of this training is to provide them with first-hand information about the host country and its culture. However, for this training to be

effective, it is important to provide realistic job previews during the visit, as the expatriates may find the intensity of culture shock to be high, when there is a difference in the culture of the country during the pre-departure visit and the actual assignment.

Pre-departure Cross-Cultural Training is given to the expats before he visits the host country. Information is provided about the general culture, simple norms of the society, survival language, business etiquettes, negotiation tactics and general social behaviors. Training is also given to the families of the expats as it is mostly the family members who are not able to adjust than the employee. Some companies go to the extent of providing job support facilities to the spouses and school assistance for their children. The actual process of cross-cultural training should result in the expatriate learning both content and skills that will improve interactions with the host-country individuals by reducing misunderstandings and inappropriate behaviors.

Post-arrival training is also given to the expatriate after he arrives to the host country. Assistance is given for accommodation, travel, banking, medical and miscellaneous requirements, so that he is not “lost” in the strange environment. Usually companies have their own employee to assist the new expatriate to adjust to the foreign environment.

The Japanese expatriates experience significantly fewer incidences of failure as they send abroad managers who are far better prepared and more adept at working and flourishing in a foreign environment. The success is largely attributable to training programs and an intelligent planning by the human resource management staff. Another factor for their success is the long-term association on an overseas assignment, which is on an average of five years. This duration makes them to adjust initially to the new environment and then to function at full capacity in its later years..

4. Organizational support

Organizational support contributes significantly towards reducing cultural shock. The more an expatriate is supported by the employer, the lesser will be the cultural shock. The employee might also be concerned whether the organization’s selection processes and mechanisms for choosing expatriates were fair and equitable. The organization should also provide sufficient relocation compensation package. The organization should maintain sufficient contact during the expatriate assignment. An organizational culture that encourages strong social support from

expatriate co-workers in the overseas subsidiaries would provide new expatriates with information about what is acceptable and unacceptable in the host culture.

5. Technical competence.

According to Mendenhall and Oddou (1985), all expatriates are assigned to their overseas assignment to accomplish a task. Possessing the necessary expertise or skills to perform the requisite tasks has been identified as an important factor in resolving culture shock. Despite the importance of expatriates skills and abilities, there is ample evidence that choosing expatriates based primarily on their job-related abilities is a fundamental mistake and that technical competence alone is a poor predictor of whether or not an expatriate possesses the ability to overcome cultural shock.

A combination of job related abilities and personality traits in an expatriate candidate would reduce the likelihood of an expatriate's cultural shock. Although it is difficult to find a candidate who possess both these qualities, research shows that these candidates are more likely to succeed a foreign assignment.

CULTURE IN INDIA

India, a country known for its diversity, versatility and its uniqueness may definitely exemplify an intricate country for any foreigner to understand the cultural nuances at one go. Indians are proud of the huge variety of their country, which includes 6 metros, 28 states and 7 union territories, with more than 20 official languages and seven major religions. The challenge for any expatriate is to succeed by understanding the business, culture, traditions, values and most importantly the behavior of the people of India.

Hofstede's cross-cultural comparison on India

- **Individualism and Collectivism:** Indian culture emphasizes on interdependence and mutual aid whereas American culture emphasizes on individual liberty. United States ranks as the most individualistic with an index of 91, while India's index in 48.
- **Short term orientation:** In the Indian culture people value the past, with a rich respect for tradition and the need to fulfill historical social obligation

- **Uncertainty avoidance:** Employees value clarity and feel very comfortable in receiving specific directions from their supervisors. They have high level of uncertainty avoidance and prefer to avoid ambiguity at work.
- **High power distance:** Indian people believe that there are strong and legitimate decision-making rights separating managers and employees.

Social values in India

- **Preference for personalized relationship:** Femininity is observed in Indian society. So Indian culture treasures relationship among people and are caring in nature.
- **Group imbedded ness:** The members of a group are bound by personalized relationship while others are strangers and must be distanced.
- **Hierarchical perspective:** Indians tend to arrange things, persons, relationships and ideas hierarchically. The high power distance, status consciousness, centralized decision making aspects proves this perspective.

Working practices India

- Indians appreciate punctuality but may not reciprocate it. It is advisable to make appointments at least one month in advance and confirm them when arriving in India. A flexible schedule will prove useful. In contrast, business meetings in Brazil, Germany and United States start on time.
- Business appointments should ideally be made for late morning or early afternoon, between the hours of 11 and 4.
- Making decisions is often a slow and thoughtful process in Indian culture. Deadlines should not be rushed, as impatience is seen as aggressive, rude and disrespectful.
- Focus on results - Indian organizations always keep their focus on the end outcomes, rather than the process of obtaining it.
- Centralized decision making - It is a system in which decisions are made at the top level of an organization and the local managers are given the charge to implement them.

Communication in India

- Regular contact by phone and email followed by frequent personal visits will help when doing business in India
- When trying to build a relationship, complimenting and flattering will put Indians at ease.
- Indians prefer to be asked about their personal details, like where they come from and what they like.
- Indians do not wish to tell “no”. Evasive refusals, which are more polite, are desirable.
- Indian body language is expressive. While listening, nodding of head means, “We are paying attention”, and not “We agree with you.”
- Indians use titles and surnames when they meet first.

Negotiation in India

- Building confidence and trust is an important factor here. Though, it may take a long time to establish a relationship, it will help to have a sustained and personal relationship in future. Efficient time management may be viewed as aggressiveness or greed in India.
- People in India are open to being persuaded. They expect elaborate descriptions and persuasive speeches. It is better to brief the educational qualifications, expertise and experience onset.
- Agendas are not strictly adhered to. The broad aims of a negotiation will be revealed early in a discussion, but the specific objectives may not be disclosed soon.
- Indians are usually flexible, patient negotiators, and they use personalized and sometimes emotional arguments. They are willing to compromise in the interest of entering into good relations.
- Contracts are considered only as statement of intent, which can be modified later. It is perceived as the beginning of a negotiation and not the end. This is in sharp contrast to the Western negotiation style.

Below are few methods to make / break relationships in India:

Table 1 Table showing methods to make / break relationships in India

Ice-breakers	Ice-makers
Ask about their family, describe yours	Politics, particularly, Kashmir and China
Show interest in which state they come from and what it is like	Be patronizing about Indian culture and the colonial period
India's economic progress	Moan about call centers and Indian accents.

CONCLUSION:

Though the world's business and economy keep changing from time to time, the most critical aspect of any organization is to adapt to it and succeed in the same. Cross-cultural training is the topic of any day. However, the intensity of the training has to be considered for every employee who is on a foreign assignment. The more an expatriate is knowledgeable about the country, the less will be the cultural shock for him as. The factors influencing cultural shock needs to be considered when training is given to an employee. It is even better to clearly understand the culture of his own country before knowing about another culture, as the expatriate will be able to gauge the similarities and differences in both the cultures and assimilate easily. General awareness of a host country will definitely help the expatriate to bag any international assignment easily. Indian culture is very diverse and any expatriate coming to India will face culture shock because of the cultural differences from state to state and from city to city. A brief of the country's cultural, social and business tactics are explained here so as to reduce the cultural shock of any foreigner. Opportunities are reduced indirectly for any expats by the Indian government itself because of the rule that an expat's spouse is ineligible to work in India, inspite of getting an intra-company transfer. If the spouse decides to work in India, they have to go back and get an employment visa. These outdated visa regimes makes dual career couples to think and rethink before coming to India. Had these difficulties been resolved by the Government of India, it would be a cakewalk for any foreign national to work in India.

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