

Reverse Culture Shock: C'est What?

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Although culture shock has become a mainstream word, reverse culture shock remains a largely unanticipated and unrecognized event. Expatriates and organizations alike tend to overlook the challenges and risks associated with returning from an international assignment. After all, how hard can it be to take up your old life and fit back into your culture of origin?

Actually, it can be very hard under normal circumstances – and even more so if the expatriate (family) has experienced a traumatic event during the time abroad or if they are returning prematurely. This article takes a look at understanding the repatriation experience – and how you can be proactive in making a successful return home.

The More Things Change, the More They Do Indeed Change

Most long-term expatriate assignments last two or more years. A lot can happen in just two years, both with the expatriate and back in the home country. Assignees will have weathered the impact and crisis of culture shock upon the initial settling-in phase of the relocation. As a result, they are stronger and more confident. They also have an expanded repertoire of behaviors and workplace skills, along with a broadened cultural horizon that incorporates values and attitudes of the host culture.

In the same way that assignees do not really know their own cultural biases and behaviors until they clash with the culture in the host location, returning expatriates seldom realize how much they have changed. That is, until

they get back home and discover that they are no longer a sure fit with family, friends, and colleagues.

After the initial joy of returning to a familiar home environment, discrepancies start to become apparent. The reception by friends and family eventually cools down, as people soon lose interest in hearing about experiences overseas. And at work, expatriates may feel they have been demoted and may even experience outright hostility in their receiving teams when they talk about their foreign experiences. (See sidebar, “Practical Pointers.”)

But the attitudes are not one-sided. Expatriates often become highly critical of their home culture and way of life. Daily living is boring, the culture is too wasteful and work-oriented, streets are too dirty, and so on. Whatever the critique, it is clear that the host culture has rubbed off on the expatriate, so that the foreign experience is now the reference point in assessing the home-country environment and relationships.

Back home, people, communities, and workplaces have continued to develop and change, as well. When assignees refer to their “exotic” experiences overseas, home-country contacts often accuse them of not acknowledging the legitimate and valid developments and skills of people and colleagues who did not go abroad. This situation is unfortunate, as expatriates are not showing off or being snobs but simply trying to catch up with what has happened back home. They are attempting to find a new place and new (blended) identity for themselves.

Trauma: Adding Another Layer of Anxiety

The challenges of repatriation are compounded when the assignee returns home under unusual circumstances. For example, the expatriate may have experienced a trauma while away and/or is leaving the host location involuntarily or under duress.

Overall, expatriates are a resilient and tough group. When trauma happens overseas, they carry on and seldom abandon the assignment. However, upon return to the home country, they may be haunted by personal memories or images of a life and society that no longer needs acceptance as day-to-day reality. The fallout may manifest in different ways, including depression and difficulty coping, an impulse to run away via another assignment, anger at the employer, or the belief they are “owed” for the hardship they suffered.

Practical Pointers

To help smooth over difficult situations on your return:

- Limit yourself with regards to the conversation, and pick your favorite stories and pictures to share.
- Apply the same respect and openness to colleagues representing their (and your) home culture as when you were learning from your colleagues and staff in the host culture.
- Explore “retroactive” cross-cultural education to understand how your views and communication style have changed.

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Expatriates frequently experience involuntary abandonment of an assignment as a personal and professional failure, even if the reason has nothing to do with the individual or the family. When a project is shut down by senior management, or world politics require retreat, or a disaster requires evacuation, the expatriate cycle of adaptation is left incomplete. The host country has become home, occupied by people and places for which the expatriates care deeply. In the home country, family and friends do not comprehend the expatriate's perspective and emotions towards the new home country, and so may appear insensitive, ignorant, or even insulting. On the other hand, the expatriate may appear irrational in the desire to return.

Leaving involuntarily and without preparation does not allow the full sense of accomplishment of a successfully completed assignment. Expatriates who must leave before overcoming culture shock have not conquered this challenge, potentially making this experience a "touch stone" and "failure" throughout their future. Further, an evacuation or witnessed events may traumatize expatriates and their families. Reaching closure or a vision for the future can experience delay while the expatriate comes to terms with the new situation and perhaps continues to assess the possibilities and risks of return.

Proactive Steps to a Successful Repatriation

The first step in managing your repatriation is recognition and proactive involvement. Here are some steps to keep in mind for each phase of the international assignment.

Pre-Departure:

- Talk to human resources about repatriation planning, your expectations, and the company's expectations.

- Schedule "check-in" dates, as well as a start date to discuss repatriation (at least six months before your return).
- Connect with a home-country mentor.
- Ask for a way to monitor home-country developments – through newsletters or other vehicles.
- Consult with an employee assistant program (EAP) if you or any family members have concerns.

On Assignment:

- Stay abreast of domestic newsletters and key email groups.
- Check in with human resources on a regular basis.
- Be aware of developments in the local workplace, such as management and protocol changes), and in society.
- Check in with your mentor, discuss expectations, and consider how you can contribute to the organization and where your new skills can be best applied.
- Temper any unrealistic expectations.
- Monitor economic developments, such as cost of living, housing, and daycare.
- Save your money, as there will be unexpected costs when you go home for items such as school, daycare, renovations, clothing, and others.
- A spouse considering a return to the workforce should have an up-to-date resume, stay in touch with connections, and monitor the job market.
- In case of trauma, consult with your EAP.

Upon Return:

- Facilitate your repatriation emotionally by remembering and acknowledging births, anniversaries, and other life events.
- Cooperate with human resources in discussing your new position, poten-

tial career path, and reintroduction to colleagues.

- Connect with other expatriates, and join expatriate or cultural forums.
- Provide mentoring to new expatriates and inpatriates.
- In case of involuntary return or trauma, recognize and acknowledge your unusual circumstances, facilitate internal awareness and patience, and seek appropriate resources such as your EAP.

Take Charge

In the normal turn of events, leaving a foreign assignment behind presents the expatriate with three tasks: closure, reintegration, and definition of a future. With traumatic circumstances, the scenario becomes more serious. If necessary, do not hesitate to ask your employer for a referral to professional support who understands the challenges of cross-cultural relocation and how it affects the experience of trauma.

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