

## **10 Signs Your Employees Are Experiencing Culture Shock**

As a global mobility manager, getting your employees off to their new location safe and sound is a big weight off your shoulders. You've gotten all the paperwork done, visas procured, and even helped pack a bag or two. The relocation process has gone off without a hitch. However, after a few weekly checkups, you've got a sneaking feeling that they may not be transitioning well to their new culture.

Helping employees with culture shock is a major part of every global mobility manager's job, but it can be difficult to recognize. Here are 10 signs that your employees are experiencing culture shock:

### **Tiredness and Irritability**

Does your employee come into work looking tired and ruffled? Are they unusually curt or even rude to you? These could be signs they are experiencing culture shock. Tiredness and irritability signify your employee is feeling isolated and alone, so take some time to help them learn to navigate their new culture before they further withdraw away from it.

### **Questioning their decision to accept the position**

If your employee isn't feeling confident in themselves, it may not be because of anything with the job. Oftentimes, adjusting to a new culture and experiencing embarrassing cultural mishaps can make people feel unable to handle other things in their lives, including their new job. Make sure that their workplace is supportive of them as they muddle through this difficult time.

### **Expression of homesickness**

It makes sense: if someone is feeling overly homesick, it may be a sign they aren't adjusting well. When the new culture feels foreign and impenetrable, it's easy to miss the ease and routine of life back home.

### **Over concern about their health or the health of family members**

One of the less-discussed elements of culture shock is a need for a person to try and feel like they're in control of something external to them. This can manifest in an over-concern of their health or the health of those close to them, as the affected individual tries to diagnose and fix these problems on their own.

### **Obsessive concern with cleanliness**

The need for control can also manifest as an obsessive control with cleanliness. Someone may feel their new home is "dirty" with elements foreign to them, and compulsively keeping their spaces clean is one way to "cleanse" themselves from the new culture. Of course, this only serves to further alienate themselves from their surroundings.

### **Physical ailments**

Stress often manifests itself physically, and the stress that comes along with culture shock is no different. Employees may complain of headaches, stomachaches, or physical pain as they adjust. Moreover, changes in diet and in climate can affect someone physically as well: if not used to changes in what they eat, they could end up with vitamin deficiencies or internal issues which may cause them pain.

### **Expressions of anger or depression**

Culture shock is isolating and scary, and can leave a reassignee feeling hopeless and alone. They may lash out in anger, or retreat into themselves and become depressed. This can create significant problems at work and home with lasting effects, so if you think someone is at risk of developing clinical depression or anxiety, refer them to an English-speaking therapist or psychiatrist as soon as possible.

### **Idealizing their own culture or trying quickly to adapt to the new culture**

Sometimes, divorcing oneself from the home culture allows a person to reflect on its good and bad parts from an outsider's perspective. But when culture shock comes in, people tend to romanticize their home culture in a way that prevents them from fully integrating or appreciating their new way of life. If an American expat insists on eating imported peanut butter for every meal and washing it down with a Diet Coke, you may have someone with culture shock on your hands. On the other hand, they may try to adapt too quickly to the new culture. While you may mistake this as a sign that they're adapting well, the opposite is true--if someone is forcing themselves to adapt, they will easily get frustrated if they don't know the language or culture well. Encourage them to ease into it and study up about their new culture before diving in headfirst.

### **Family conflict**

People deal with culture shock in different ways, and if those individuals are in the same family, they may clash with each other. Family conflict is one sign that individuals are having a difficult time adapting. While this conflict can be straining on the family, it's not necessarily a bad sign: fighting shows that the members of the family are comfortable being vulnerable with each other and wanting support from each other. To encourage that support, suggest families relocating set aside meaningful time to be with each other at home in order to strengthen those bonds and deal with culture shock together.

### **Disinterest in adapting to new culture**

Culture shock isn't always demonstrated in dramatic ways. Often, it's signified by disinterest and general apathy in adapting to their new culture. People may feel like it's not "worth it" to adapt to a culture they won't be staying in permanently, and won't make much of an effort to engage with their surroundings.

It can be difficult to figure out whether a reassignee is dealing with culture shock, but identifying it is crucial to help them deal with it and adapt successfully to the culture. The best way to deal with culture shock isn't to force someone into new surroundings and let them

flounder, but rather provide a strong support system. Through providing great company resources, encouraging a strong connection among relocating families and helping employees learn more about the language and culture they're entering into, you can help these relocations be smooth and successful--and nip culture shock in the bud.