

# FISH OUT OF WATER

An overseas assignment can call for major psychological adjustment and, without the flexibility to adapt to unfamiliar environments and different styles of working, even the brightest star will fail to shine, warns **Gwyn Rogers** of Kaisen Consulting

**T**HE OLD saying goes: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". The irony is that while Rudyard Kipling actually set out to demolish this blinkered view in his *Ballad of the East and West* and to celebrate cross-cultural relationships, these well-known opening lines continue to reflect popular sentiment. But now that we are living in a 'global village', it more important than ever that we make every effort to understand and adapt to different styles of working, particularly when we are posted overseas.

What is often overlooked, however, is that working abroad can require major psychological adaptation. And here's the crunch; not everyone has the right psychological make-up to adapt.

Businesses frequently fail to recognise this fact. Indeed, the increasing globalisation of business via the introduction of international processes and systems often compounds the problem. Group-wide HR policies and training can only help to minimise cultural differences up to a point. Common procedures are now largely imposed but they don't remove fundamental differences in how people think and act. Businesses often choose to ignore the extent to which people can adapt to cultural differences even though this will be a determining factor in whether an overseas placement succeeds or not.

Because someone is good at their job at their home base does not mean that they will be similarly productive in a different environment. As psychologists, we understand that there are certain aspects of an individual's psychological make-up which will determine whether or not they can adapt to living and working in a culture very different from their own.

For a start, there's the whole issue of motivation. People often take overseas assignments for self-interested reasons; aside from possible financial rewards, they see an overseas 'campaign medal' as vital to their career progression. But personal ambition, divorced from a gen-

uine commitment to learn from the experience of working in an unfamiliar culture, is not a recipe for success.

One of the more typical reasons for an individual's failure in an overseas assignment is shock or dissonance: the gap between what people expect, what really motivates them and what they actually experience. This gap causes psychological discomfort which in turn affects their behaviour. For example, this can lead to them alienating staff, offending key customers, damaging vital relationships with stakeholders and governments, and even to emotional breakdown. All this because the individual feels like a fish out of water.

There's also the problem of 'ethnocentrism': some people really find it hard to see the world from another perspective or

to accept unfamiliar social practices. We all know the classic signs: a US professional's exasperation over his French counterpart's almost sacred relationship with lunch or the August holiday season; a UK businessman's frustration in trying to get a definite 'yes' or 'no' from a Japanese colleague. It's not simply a question of grinding one's teeth and counting to ten; the individual has to understand and embrace these cultural differences.

The overseas posting has to be able to monitor his or her own behaviour. Those with fixed views who are both dogmatic and inflexible run the risk of exacerbating differences and thus reducing their own effectiveness. These 'stuck-in-their ways' types are unlikely to be able to make the necessary adaptation.

However, flexibility shouldn't be interpreted as 'going native'. The individual must be concerned not to offend but that doesn't mean that they should lose sight of what they want to achieve by over-compensating for the new cultural demands.

It is no surprise that the ability to retain emotional balance when under pressure is key to people's ability to adapt. As well as being

The gap between what people expect and what they experience causes psychological discomfort

able to stand the stresses and strains without behaving inappropriately, it's important to be able to take responsibility and to act positively, without self-doubt. Abandoning responsibility for one's actions – accepting that your fate is in the hands others – will undoubtedly lead to losing control of the situation.

Doing business overseas, particularly in developing countries, can be unnerving. Aside from the obvious cultural differences, individuals will be faced with unstructured ways of working and unexpected developments. Seemingly strong characters, once removed from a familiar milieu, may cease to function effectively if they cannot accept a level of unpredictability.

Consider the case of the company director who found herself stranded in a unstable Central Africa country, with limited contact with the outside world and no idea of when she was going to be 'rescued'. With the hours ticking by before a crucial meeting to clinch a multi-million pound deal, she used the time to "do some networking and see a bit of the country". For her, the sense of unpredictability was a positive experience. Could we all claim the ability to react in the same way in a similar situation?

Aside from psychological make-up, an individual's personal circumstances can be a key determinant of their effectiveness and, in our experience, this is seldom given enough attention. A partner or spouse, family dependents or aged relatives all need to be considered. The most obvious candidate may in fact be unsuitable because of circumstances beyond their control. For example, their partner may feel uncomfortable in an equatorial climate. A partner's discomfort can quite easily become sufficient distraction to cause the assignment to fail its objectives.

Finally, there's the lifestyle issue. As human beings, we all need a degree of predictability in our lives. When moving around overseas, this can be provided by a 'portable' hobby or pastime. If I can take it to Dublin, Dubai or Dakar, I am more likely to have something familiar which I enjoy and have an entrée to meeting new people. For example, someone who is interested in diving may, for obvious rea-

As well as coping with the stresses without behaving inappropriately, it's important to take responsibility and act positively

sons, welcome an assignment in the Middle East whereas a dedicated gastronome would suffer in such an austere environment. Classically, the football enthusiast who at home would regularly watch his or her team would feel trapped without being able to enjoy that pleasure – 'cabin fever' could set in.

So organisations need to recognise that the ability to adapt psychologically to living and working in a culture very different from their own is distinct from whether or not someone is technically the right person for the job. They might be brilliant in their own culture but there is always a risk associated with asking people to work in a culture very different from their own, whichever part of the planet they're from.

Organisations need to identify areas of risk for an individual and work on minimising their effect so that they do not become the deciding factor between success and failure. Moreover, they need to learn to take difficult decisions and elect not to send the 'obvious' candidate if he or she is too high a risk.

Clearly, a first assignment overseas will always carry an element of risk; you can never guarantee that you have selected the right individual. In the end, it's all about adapting to circumstances and accepting the differences. Without these psychological strengths, even the brightest star will fail to shine. **fe**

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