Setting your expectations in a new culture

Beginning a new job is stressful, but beginning a new job while adjusting to an unfamiliar culture can be daunting. Different ways of working and communicating, gender roles, beliefs, lifestyles, concepts of time and often complicated business and social etiquette can impede professional objectives and hinder acclimatization.

The success of any international assignment hinges not only on preparation – learning as much as possible about the country and culture you're moving to – but also setting realistic, and achievable, expectations for yourself and your new work team.

Complexities of culture

It takes time to understand the nuances of a new culture and new organization but the expat manager needs to make a positive first impression and quickly instill confidence in employees, senior management, stakeholders and customers. Here are some ideas to help prepare and set realistic expectations for yourself and business colleagues:

- Before your first day at work, take a week to deal with any unexpected issues regarding your move. Get to know your new neighbourhood and work location and start adapting to the new climate, transportation systems and food.
- If possible, wait awhile before making sweeping changes at work until you've learned more about how the business – and your team – functions.
- Understand your employees' expectations of you**.** Do they expect you to foster their independence and encourage a free exchange of ideas? Or do they expect you to be more directive by giving instructions and would therefore consider asking questions or offering opinions disrespectful or even insubordinate?
- Adhere to the business protocol of your new location. For example, in many countries, calling colleagues and team members by their first names is considered rude or disrespectful and a firm handshake may not be appropriate.
- When managing your team, document all instructions and objectives in writing as well as relaying them verbally so that everyone has a clear understanding of your expectations.
- When speaking, be sure to articulate clearly and try to avoid slang, irony, humour and double negatives. Also be careful of metaphors and analogies as they rarely translate across cultures – especially those involving sports.
- Pay close attention to body language. Gestures and postures can be misperceived across cultures. For example, the circle formed with the thumb and first finger that means okay in North America is considered obscene in Brazil.Eye contact also differs around the world. In North America, making eye contact signals respect and attention and smiling indicates approachability and friendliness. In other cultures, making eye contact may be considered rude or disrespectful.

Most importantly, be prepared to adapt your management style. What worked in your home country may not work in your new location. For more information on managing diverse teams or what to expect in a new location, contact us for support and resources.