

How to overcome cultural shock when changing business environment?

Having changed industries (and countries) a couple of times myself, I know the pain of changing cultural environment. It requires individual 'alertness' because you need to question most, if not all, of your assumptions. If you want to be accepted and get things done, you usually have to change your behavior and approach. The experience is similar to 'culture shock' when moving countries except when changing business culture, only few colleagues will link your comments, questions or behavior to your different business background.

Culture shock results in negative feelings once the 'honeymoon' is over. Feelings of irritation, disorientation, criticism... are all signs of shock. It requires time to adjust to the new environment, however, newcomers don't always get time to find their way and adjust. Fast adjustment is especially critical for new leaders and managers!

Onboarding programs are meant to help newcomers with integration and to facilitate a quick start. They seldomly spend time to talk about the organization's culture. At best, the programs mention mission, vision and values. The reason why culture is absent from programs, is that culture is very often implicit and therefore difficult to communicate.

Explaining what culture is, is already a challenge in itself! A practical definition of organization culture is: the set of behaviors, processes and practices (how things are done) that put the organization's values to life and that distinguishes one organization from another.

Processes are the easiest to teach a newcomer. They are usually transparent since they often are the basis of automation or play a central role in the way business is managed. A number of these are therefore - in one way or another - part of the onboarding program. Examples are performance management, business planning and reporting processes, internal communication processes...

More difficult are behaviors and practices. Most newcomers learn about these by observing and mimicking others or the hard way: by trial and error. Especially when new leaders and managers are joining, attention should be given to clarifying which behavior is expected since employees will be looking at them from day one to set the example and live the values.

In order to facilitate ‘acculturation’ of a new employee, a buddy or mentor can help new arrivals to early on unveil which behavior is expected and accepted. A buddy or mentor can also help how to find out how things are done that are not put in formal processes.

The selection of a buddy or mentor requires of course careful consideration as it needs to be someone who is culturally aware, lives the company values and sets the example.

Culture is the glue of an organization but many onboarding programs overlook the need to support acculturation of newcomers. Especially for new leaders and managers, the assignment of a buddy or mentor who will guide them through the culture shock, will be most beneficial. HR Roads can help you with setting up buddy or mentorship programs for new leaders.



Kristien Debounoux founded HR Roads after 30+ years of international HR experience.

HR Roads stands for successful design, guidance and implementation of strategic change processes. Our successful experiences are situated in the field of HR Strategy, Change Management and HR Consulting & Projects.

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