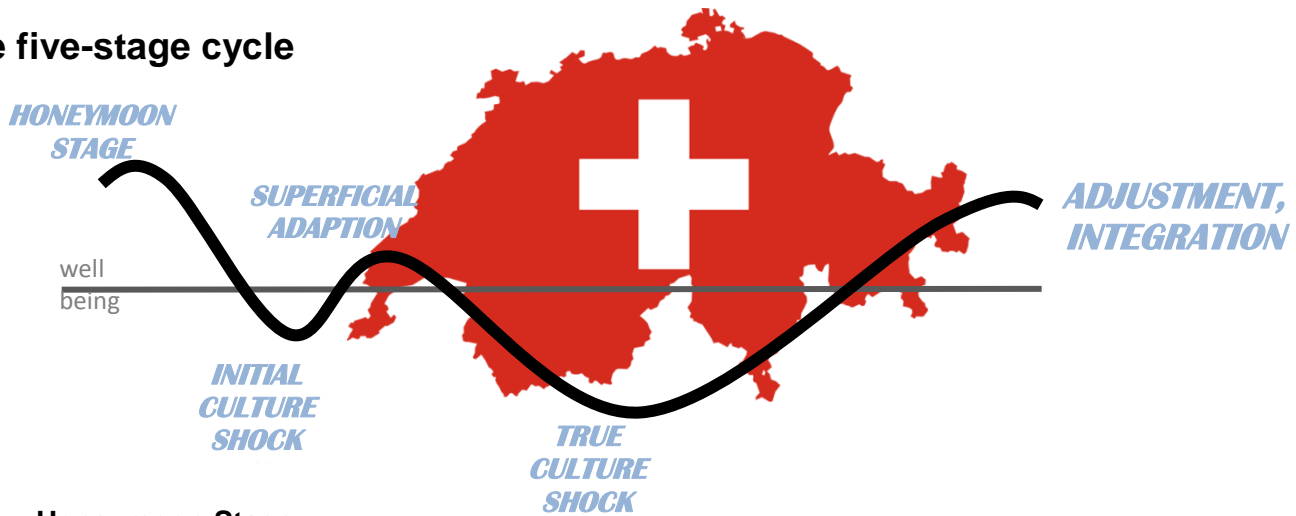


Crosscultural Adjustment in Switzerland

“Are you going to stay in Switzerland or is it temporary?” One of the most asked questions in our intercultural surrounding. Whichever it is for you, you’ve certainly been confronted with some of the here described phases. But at the beginning we’re usually too busy and too full with anticipation to think of the subliminal challenges we have to face when moving to another country. It’s all about the move, housing, school for the kids... all time-consuming planning and excitement. So let’s have a look how it usually goes on.

The five-stage cycle



1. Honeymoon Stage

After arriving, everything in the new place is at first fascinating and exciting. A whole new world is waiting to be explored, a great adventure. This is why the first stage is mostly much easier for the people who have left their original country than for their family and friends who stay behind.

Differences are brushed off as “interesting” and “charming”. You feel like an observing tourist. “Interesting how they deal with things here.”

This phase can last a couple of days to a couple of weeks. But sooner or later, assumptions of how great things will be get reality-tested.

2. Initial Culture Shock

This phase is often initiated by a relatively minor conflict or problem, e.g. a sickness in your family, difficulties with the kids in school, a plumbing problem. Back home it would have been no big deal but in a new and unfamiliar context you are more easily shaken.

It is during this period that everyday differences become frustrating and annoying. Daily struggles and difficulty in communicating especially with the Swiss German produce deep dissatisfaction and feelings of incompetence. Some people start to physically feel that something is not right. Quite some start complaining about every-day issues. Don’t get me wrong: This is indeed a very helpful strategy for this phase and we all have lived through it while sitting together in playgroup with our young ones. Just don’t remain in it. After some time of trashing to find relief of daily stress better gather real information on how things are done here to conquer your uncertainty. Find people who have lived here for longer, read books or visit a seminar to share your frustration and fears in a constructive way. Check out for one of my next articles about “Culture Shock”.

3. Superficial Adjustment , Adaption (Integration)

You have begun to figure out the rules of the new culture and are therefore feeling again more comfortable and in control. On the surface it all looks okay. For a few this happens late enough so they are at the end of their stay in Switzerland. They spend this phase living in a bubble surrounded by their expat and foreign friends and keep the social involvement with locals to a minimum. After that, they either move back home or on to another country without facing the 4th stage of cultural adjustment and thus achieving a more satisfactory level of integration.

But even two years are most of the time long enough to be confronted with the challenges of stage 4, especially with children in the local school system growing up in the Swiss mentality...

4. True Culture Shock

After the basics have left you a bit more confident in your life in phase 3, the true culture shock often comes as a surprise. But sooner or later you begin to realise this is all about a deeper level of values, priorities and ideas. You might feel that everything around you is so heavily opposed to what you’re used to that you maybe even

think it was the wrong decision to come here. In addition: important family events in your home country take place without you and friends back home move on. You might even wonder “Are they forgetting about me?”



All this can lead to an even stronger loss of confidence on the personal and cultural level. Quite often I see people losing their motivation to be in touch with the host culture. Some are reluctant to continue learning German during this phase. “It anyway doesn’t help with all the Swiss German.”

Phase 4 is difficult to navigate and it takes a huge effort on the individual’s part. Like a lady once told me: “A crossing over of all our normal fears, a pushing ourselves way further than we may have thought possible. And it can take years”. This period is really worth to be

managed effectively in order to achieve a successful outcome for your time in Switzerland, whether only temporary or permanent. In order to fight mental isolation it certainly helps to talk to people in a similar situation. But at times this rather keeps you stuck in the same perpetual behaviour pattern. Additional gossiping-strategy might cover the real topics, throwing you back into phase 2. If this is the case, professional support, like a trained coach has turned out to be more efficient.

Did you know that the number one expatriate problem is the inability of the spouse to adjust?!... What I’ve learnt during my years as a professional coach is definitely: Don’t wait. Better approach the situation early. Make sure the path leads you into the positive adaption/integration phase 5 and not into apathy or resignation.

5. Adaption and Integration

At this point you have integrated into the Swiss culture and you’re able to function without much effort, perhaps even adopting a dual cultural identity. At the best you have realised you neither have to change the Swiss nor become like them. You’ve succeeded in making local friends and feel more like home. This is the period of highest satisfaction I’m convinced you can only experience after having lived and worked through phase 4. It is not a safe stage and throwbacks are normal.

The cycle is very individual

This model has proved to be a very helpful basis for discussion. While predictable, it is always experienced in a unique way by each individual though. Some people go through the stages in a different order, at different times, or perhaps not at all...It depends on feelings, expectations about the move, the extent of difference between the two cultures, the amount of social support and of course personality. The model integrates a number of theories including change management and loss. The element of loss may sound surprising, but it refers to loss of country, family, friends, values, language, culture, etc.

Reverse cultural shock

In case you move back to your home country you might experience an additional stage to this classical model, the one of reverse cultural shock, also known as the ‘re-entry’ stage. If you don’t prepare for this carefully, you may be irritated that you don’t find your world back home the way you’d left it. This stage is typical for ‘perpetual’ expats in particular.

But as a matter of fact, when looking at it in a more differentiated way, we often see that basically the same five phases of the cycle of crosscultural adjustment can show again either if you return to your home country or if you move on to another country.

Mirjam is a trained coach for English speaking people living in Switzerland. She’s a native Swiss and a teacher in the Swiss school system and can therefore answer the questions “How is this usually done here?” or “Is it normal that...?”



Bringing somebody in who can read between the lines is often a big advantage.

For more on Mirjam and her professional solution-based coaching: www.coaching-lounge.ch or pick a flyer in the WAC-clubroom.

Mirjam also runs the popular HOW THE SWISS WORK seminars at the WAC in Uster covering the Swiss school system, unwritten rules of daily life and many more topics. For more information and to keep informed on upcoming dates contact our club office manager: com@wac.ch