



Be remarkable

# U.S. CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE

Cultural Linguistic Services, Human Resources, 120 USB, <http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/administration/linguistics>  
Please contact [jane-gressang@uiowa.edu](mailto:jane-gressang@uiowa.edu), 319-335-5822 for assistance.

*Anyone who sets out to describe “the American workplace” is faced immediately with two tough questions: Which Americans and which workplace? Are we talking about white Americans or African Americans? Hispanic, Asian, or Native Americans? Americans from New England, the mid-Atlantic, the Deep South, the Midwest, or the far West? Men or women? Older Americans, middle-aged Americans, or young Americans? Americans in cities or Americans in rural areas?*

*And which workplace? Public sector or private sector? Profit or non-profit? Business, government, or education? The hard-hat workplace or the white collar workplace? Are we talking about the retail sector, manufacturing, financial, or health care? Is this the pharmaceutical workplace or the insurance, hospitality, oil and gas, or high tech workplace? And which division: research and development, manufacturing, sales and marketing, finance, or human resources? These entities can be entire cultures unto themselves — strange even to other Americans, to say nothing of people from outside the United States. Are there actually ways in which all of these workplaces are truly alike?*

*The answer is a cautious yes. If it is true that people from the same culture share to some extent certain deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions, and if it is also true that those shared values, beliefs, and assumptions shape the behavior of those people in common ways, then it is quite possible that people from the same culture working in a variety of different places will behave in many ways that are remarkably alike.*

—Craig Storti, in *Americans at Work: A Guide to the Can-Do People*, Intercultural Press, 2004, available online at Books 24x7: <http://skillport.books24x7.com>

## CROSS-CULTURAL BASICS

Cross-cultural communication takes some effort because you cannot rely on shared assumptions, values, and beliefs. Also, these shared assumptions, values, and beliefs are often hidden and may take some time to discover (unlike differences in food, clothing, and native language, which are often obvious). The rewards you can get from cross-cultural communication make the extra effort worthwhile. People from other backgrounds can help you gain new perspectives, challenge your problem solving skills, and make you more flexible. There is no easy way to achieve good cross-cultural communication, but here are some basic ideas to remember:

- Don't leap to conclusions, and avoid using stereotypes to make judgments.
- Be patient and tolerate ambiguity and complexity.
- Be willing to take risks and make mistakes.
- Be adaptable with your expectations and your work-style.
- Actively pursue learning about the differences between cultures.

# SOME GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT U.S. CULTURE

*The cultural information below is based on generalizations about U.S. culture in the workplace. These guidelines may be accurate about the typical behavior of a culture as a whole, but individuals choose to follow or NOT follow certain cultural norms based on their personalities. Also, culture is always changing, and people adapt to different cultures surrounding them to differing degrees. Furthermore, one country (like the U.S.) may contain many, very different cultural groups. Generalizations tend to refer to the most privileged group. For all these reasons, REMEMBER TO FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL!*

- An Individualist Culture: Most people in the U.S. value individual needs over the needs of any group to which they belong (such as a family or work group). Employees are mostly expected to take care of themselves, and to be independent. U.S. supervisors and employees tend to operate on a principle of fairness that does not include favoring someone with whom they may have a close personal relationship. U.S. workers will usually tolerate a wide variety of personality types as long as work gets done.
- A Small Power-Distance Culture: People in small power-distance countries tend to value equality in the workplace. Managers are often considered as part of the team, and usually try to be accessible to consult with employees. Employees are likely to expect superiors to be cooperative, or may challenge supervisors directly if there is a problem. Status, such as who has been on the job longer, is usually not seen as being as important as the ability to complete work effectively and quickly.
- A Competitive not a Cooperative Culture: Employees in the U.S. often compete with co-workers, since the culture in general does not value working collectively to take care of a group. U.S. workers also appreciate a relatively high amount of personally directed, positive feedback, which indicates that they are competing well.
- A Positive/ Optimistic Culture: U.S. employees tend to believe in progress, and do not feel much of a need to avoid risk in adopting new products or services. The work involved in adopting new ways is typically seen as worthwhile and good, and the possibility of failure is not focused on.
- A Relatively Direct Communication Style: In general, employees in the U.S. prefer communication that briefly explains the main point relatively soon without much introduction or discussion of related topics. One exception to this is negative feedback: U.S. natives tend not to criticize others' work in the most direct way. Saying something is "pretty good" or "okay" may mean it is unacceptable and needs a lot of changes.
- A Clock-Time Oriented Culture: U.S. employees usually keep very rigid schedules and deadlines. Arriving after the scheduled time for a meeting is very rude at work because it can be seen as wasting the other participants' time and limiting their ability to stay on schedule. Deadlines are expected to be kept exactly, so if there are reasons to change them, these need to be stated as soon as possible.
- Body Language and Personal Space: Most U.S. employees and supervisors see direct eye contact as a sign of honesty, interest, and attention. They may feel that someone who does not make direct eye contact has something bad they are trying to hide. Smiles are common, even between strangers. When shaking hands, having a firm hand and pressing the other person's hand a little is seen as a sign of a strong, confident person.

# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Avoid using jargon, slang, idiomatic expressions, contractions, and colloquialisms unless you are certain their meanings will be understood. Don't use words that you have just learned unless you are sure you can use them correctly. Avoid long sentences, double negatives, and negative wording.
- People's intelligence is often unjustly judged based on their language ability. Do not lose confidence in yourself if language learning is difficult. Very intelligent people may have trouble acquiring a new language as an adult.
- If the listener seems to be having trouble understanding you, enunciate more clearly, speak more slowly, or try to use a standard accent. Invite feedback on the clarity of your speech.
- Do not expect "yes" to always mean *yes*. Do not expect to hear "no" as the only way to say *no*. When you have doubts about what was communicated, rephrase what you think was said, and ask if that is correct.
- Work on building relationships with your co-workers. This may take some time, but may help you understand more of what they say. Try not to feel offended when your co-workers don't act the way that you expect them to.
- Teach U.S. employees effective ways to work cooperatively in groups. Recognize that other employees may need to be encouraged to take greater personal responsibility and work more independently.
- Do not criticize your co-workers directly in front of others. Being direct with someone who highly values indirectness may lead to offending someone unintentionally. Be careful about giving praise in front of others. U.S. employees may need frequent praise and appreciate it in front of others, but those from less competitive, individualistic cultures may feel embarrassed.
- Encourage co-workers to talk about work conflicts with you directly or through a mediator. Reassure them by explaining what will happen if they come to you with a problem or suggestion, otherwise you may never hear about what is bothering someone.
- If someone seems to be suffering from severe culture shock or depression, be sensitive about the person's feelings. Everyone who chooses to go abroad experiences culture shock to some degree. It may be necessary to explain that seeking help from a counselor is not shameful, and will be confidential.

## JOB INTERVIEWING TIPS

*Job interviews are particularly stressful situations for everyone, but being aware of your culture can help you explain your needs and satisfy interviewers.*

*In the U.S., competition and individualism are valued. Give examples from your past of what goals and results you (as an individual) were able to achieve at work, in school, or when volunteering. Prepare a mental list of specific, positive details from real examples of your work before the interview. Talking about your individual accomplishments is not considered bragging in a job interview! Don't rely on your resume to communicate your achievements.*

*U.S. employers are interested in work being done more than in personal relationships. Don't try to build a relationship with interviewers by offering to do them favors; this will make them uncomfortable. Do you prefer working in groups and building relationships with co-workers? Can you work independently? Ask what is expected during the interview. An employee who is comfortable working in a group is a great asset if more collaboration is needed, but this same person may be unhappy if expected to mostly work alone.*

*Get ready! Practice the interview by describing results you have achieved and obstacles you have overcome. Think about your body language while you are talking. U.S. natives tend to view strong handshakes and direct eye contact positively. Prepare your interview attire. It should be neat, tidy and appropriate for the workplace you are applying for. Bring a nice portfolio with copies of your resume. Plan how to get to the interview so you can be on time (this means 5-10 minutes before the appointment for most in the U.S.).*

# CONVERSATIONAL PUZZLES

These conversation examples by Craig Storti ([Cross-Cultural Dialogues](#), [Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#) both from Intercultural Press) can be used for discussion with co-workers or friends.

---

## THE THINKER

RICHARD: DID CLAUDE TURN IN HIS FINAL DRAFT YET?

ISABELLE: NO, HE'S STILL WORKING ON IT. YOU KNOW CLAUDE, ALWAYS THINKING AND PONDERING.

RICHARD: BUT I NEEDED THAT REPORT LAST WEEK.

ISABELLE: I KNOW. CLAUDE NEVER MEETS HIS DEADLINES; IT'S A REAL PROBLEM. BUT HIS IDEAS ARE SO WONDERFUL, AREN'T THEY?

RICHARD: I'VE COMPLAINED ABOUT HIM TWICE TO OUR BOSS, BUT HE DOESN'T DO ANYTHING.

ISABELLE: YOU'VE COMPLAINED? WHY?

*Who is the employee from the U.S.? Why doesn't Richard like Claude? What would you do if you were Isabelle and Richard's co-worker or boss?*

---

## TEA

MR. WALKER: I WAS WONDERING, MR. SINGH, IF THE BOOKS I'D ORDERED HAD COME IN YET?

MR. SINGH: YES, YES. THE BOOKS HAVE ARRIVED AT THE WAREHOUSE.

MR. WALKER: OH, GOOD. MAYBE I CAN PICK THEM UP ON MY WAY HOME.

MR. SINGH: NO, NO. I WILL SEND SOMEONE TO BRING THEM FOR YOU.

MR. WALKER: THAT'S VERY KIND, BUT I DON'T MIND GOING ALONG. IN CASE THEY NEED HELP.

MR. SINGH: NO, NO. YOU WAIT HERE, MR. WALKER. AND WE WILL DRINK TEA.

*Why will Mr. Walker feel uncomfortable drinking tea? What could Mr. Walker and Mr. Singh do so that they both feel comfortable?*

---

FOR MORE INFORMATION, OR FOR WORKPLACE SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE:  
PLEASE CONTACT CULTURAL LINGUISTIC SERVICES, THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA  
[HTTP://WWW.UIOWA.EDU/HR/ADMINISTRATION/LINGUISTICS](http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/administration/linguistics)

**JANE GRESSANG, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE SPECIALIST, [JANE-GRESSANG@UIOWA.EDU](mailto:jane-gressang@uiowa.edu)  
319-335-5822, M.A. IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES,  
FLUENT IN SPANISH AND SOME MANDARIN**

**VIVIANE DIAMITANI, LANGUAGE CONSULTANT, [VIVIANEDIAMITANI@YAHOO.COM](mailto:vivianediamitani@yahoo.com)  
FLUENT IN FRENCH AND EWE**

**YOUSUN SHIN, LANGUAGE CONSULTANT, [YOUSUN-SHIN@UIOWA.EDU](mailto:yousun-shin@uiowa.edu), 319-335-2461,  
FLUENT IN KOREAN**

---