

# Cross cultural training

# Definitions of culture

There is no one definition of culture. The book, "Global Marketing Management" has the following definitions.

Geert Hofstede, a well known cultural anthropologist, defines it as, "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category from those of another." Another definition offered by Vern Terpstra and Kenneth David says:

"Culture is a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of society. These orientations, taken together, provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable."

Yet another definition, found in the book "International Marketing," says "culture is the entire social heritage of the human race." The book goes on to quote Colette Guillaumin and says that culture is "the totality of knowledge and practices, both intellectual and material of society...[it] embraces everything from food to dress, from household techniques to industrial techniques, from forms of politeness to mass media, from work rhythms to the learning of familiar rules."

# A definition of culture

While each definition has a different emphasis, they agree that there are common elements. This list of elements comes from the book "International Marketing."

Material culture

Social institutions

Humans and the universe

Aesthetics

Language

# Identifying personal cultural values and beliefs

**First identify your views regarding these cultural aspects.  
This is the first step to discovering your own values and beliefs.**

**Attitude Towards Age  
Concept of Fate and Destiny  
View of Human Nature  
Attitude Towards Change  
Attitude Towards Taking Risks  
Concept of Suffering and Misfortune  
Concept of Fate  
Source of Self Esteem / Self Worth  
Concept of Equality  
Attitude Towards Family  
Degree of Realism  
Attitude Towards Doing  
View of the Natural World**

# The typical American position

If you completed the activity in the previous lesson, you'll know your views regarding the thirteen aspects of culture that are to follow. Now you'll discover the typical American views.

## **Attitude Towards Age**

Americans do not really value age for two basic reasons:

Americans value accomplishments and getting things done. The older you are, the less you are perceived to be able to get things done.

Americans value "newness." Older Americans are seen as not being "with it." They may be less likely, and less eager, to adopt something new than younger generations.

## **Concept of Fate and Destiny**

Americans don't leave much up to Fate and Destiny. They believe in self-determination. You can do whatever you want to do with your life and, most importantly, you are the one in charge. If you don't succeed, you have no one, and nothing, to blame but yourself.

## **View of Human Nature**

Americans basically consider people to be trustworthy and good. Because of this, they are pretty friendly to strangers. They tend to look for the reasons why people go bad.

## **Attitude Towards Change**

Americans love progress and are constantly seeking perfection. You can't have either without change, so change is a good thing. Traditions have their place, but they should not be the ruling force.

## **Attitude Towards Taking Risk**

One of the things that I took comfort in when starting my own business endeavors was the fact that many of the successful businessmen we know of today had their share of failures and disappointments. But that was ok. They simply learned from their mistakes and moved on. That exemplifies the American view towards taking risk. Failure is seen as a temporary setback. You will only improve your product via trial and error and if you don't succeed at one endeavor, there are plenty of other opportunities just waiting to be tackled.

# The typical American position

## **Concept of Suffering and Misfortune**

If you are unhappy, it's your own fault. You are the one in charge of your life and destiny, so find what it is that makes you happy and do it.

## **Sources of Self Esteem/Self Worth**

In America, you are the maker of your own self worth instead of being born into it or being given it due to your position, rank, or age. You earn your own self esteem.

## **Concept of Equality**

One of the things that the first settlers wanted to leave behind was the debilitating class structure that was found in Europe. Because of this, American culture revolves around the notion of egalitarianism. Everyone is of equal value regardless of birth, power, fame, or wealth.

## **Attitude Towards Formality**

Basically because of the concept that everyone is of equal value, Americans are usually pretty casual and informal when it comes to social and professional interactions. Americans don't stand on ceremony and don't really use titles or pay much attention to rank.

## **Degree of Realism**

Americans are optimistic. One of the reasons could be the fact that they see themselves as being the ones in control. Americans tend to see things better than they are at times.

## **Attitude Towards Doing**

Not only do you achieve because of what you do, but your survival is based on it. You can't depend on others. Mere talk gets you nowhere and while the arts are nice, it's the activities that lead to concrete results that are of the highest value.

## **View of the Natural World**

There's nothing unnatural about the natural world. It can be studied, predicted, and even manipulated and controlled. How did your views compare? Even if you personally don't agree with all of the typical American views, it's important to remember that these are the views that those from other cultures may think you have before they get to know you. In the beginning they will identify you only as an American, not as an individual.

## **For Discussion:**

Can you think of any actions in American society that exemplifies these attitudes? For example, American's attitude towards age is exemplified by the images of physical beauty and youth we see in the media.

# The roots of American culture

No culture just "became" what it is. History and geography create cultural foundations. The purpose of this lesson is to not only let you see how history and geography have influenced American culture, but to also help you begin thinking in terms of what historical and geographical facts could be at the root of your new culture.

When I was in school, we studied British history – a lot of it. Why? Because British history has greatly influenced American culture. It helps explain the type of oppression the first settlers were trying to escape, the nature of immigrants in general, and America's Protestant roots.

The Peace Corps has identified four defining features of American culture and American traits that are associated with them. This information illustrates just how closely American history and geography is tied to its culture.

# Features of American culture

## **Feature #1: Protestantism**

Protestantism gives us the notion that a strong work ethic is good, the idea of predestination and the belief that through worldly success, one can find salvation

Some traits in American culture that are based on Protestantism include: the focus on celebrities and the rich and famous, the emphasis on achievement, American's identification with their jobs, the idea of a self-made person.

## **Feature #2: American Geography**

The early settlers first coming to America were faced with a massive amount of land offering unlimited resources. The population was sparse and, being a distance from Europe, they were rather isolated.

Some traits in American culture based on these geological facts include: the fact that American's never really accept things as they are, the fact that they don't save much, their belief that you can always start over, their emphasis on self-reliance, the fact that, for the most part, there is little conservation of resources, and the "modest" limits on immigration (there is always enough of everything to go around).

# Features of American culture

## **Feature #3: Escape From Oppression**

When the first settlers left Europe, and many of those who later followed, they were running away from religious persecution, economic repression and a rigid class system.

The search for something better is one of the basic foundations of American culture. It explains why Americans are generally tolerant of differences, why America has a president and not a king, our emphasis on informality, the fact that we have no problems with and no fear of reprimand if we criticize the boss or some other figure of authority, the checks and balances of the U.S. Constitution, the notion of egalitarianism, our optimism, the desire to work for oneself and, if we do work for someone else, the fact that there is often little supervision.

# Features of American culture

## **Feature #4 The Nature of the American Immigrant**

Most immigrants who come to America have a sense of adventure. They are willing to take risks and are usually spurred on by a dissatisfaction with their lives in their native land.

These traits have spawned a culture that looks at failure as an opportunity to learn, not as something to be ashamed of, that embraces change and along with that, doesn't mind changing jobs or addresses.

The above has focused on American history, geography and culture. The book "International Marketing" has an entire chapter devoted to this subject and covers other countries and cultures as well.

# Discovering common reactions to situations in foreign lands

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. These are topics for discussion and are here to help you identify potential differences and the decisions you can make to easily adjust to your new culture.

1. You've moved to a new country where job opportunities are rather limited. You find out that there is a great need for English teachers, so you decide to teach. You are hired instantly, but are told that you will be paid at a later date. You have some money in savings, so you say fine. However, the first semester ends and you haven't been paid anything. The second semester begins and you're told that your papers have been lost and you will have to start the process all over again. Now your money is running out. You have no idea when you will be paid. The school says that can give you a loan, but when you ask for one, they say that they don't have any money. You have passed the mid-point of the school year. Other teachers are quitting for a myriad of reasons. You also know that there are no other English teachers who can take you place if you decide to leave. What do you do?

# Discovering common reactions to situations in foreign lands

2. You move to a new country that is very proud of its music. However you aren't that crazy about it. To you, once you've heard one song, you've heard them all and their concerts tend to bore you. One day you're asked by someone who saw you at a concert if you enjoyed it. What do you say?
3. You (and your friend) are invited to a party by an acquaintance in your new country. You are quite excited because you're told that a lot of influential people will be there and it is quite a social event. However when you get there, the person who invited you comes up to talk to you for awhile, but in general, you are ignored. What do you do? The next day, your acquaintance asks you if you enjoyed the party. What do you say?
4. You (and your partner) decide to invite your co-workers from your new job to your house for dinner. Everyone accepts and seems to have a good time. However, time passes and you never receive a return invitation from any of them. In fact, you are never invited to any of their houses. What do you do? How do you treat them?

# Discovering common reactions to situations in foreign lands

5. A man comes to visit a couple (husband and wife). Upon entering the house, both the man and the woman prepare to meet their guest with a handshake. The guest shakes the hand of the man, but completely ignores the woman even though her hand is extended. What do you do if you are the woman? What do you do if you are her husband?
6. You are a woman and a man hisses at you as you walk by. What do you do?

# Cultural differences: classifying cultures

Based on his worldwide study of several IBM subsidiaries, the Dutch anthropologist, Geert Hofstede developed several dimensions that can be used to classify cultures. These "dimensions" are:

Power Distance  
Uncertainty Avoidance  
Individualism  
Masculinity  
Long-termism

Here is a description of each taken from the book "Global Marketing Management."

# Power distance

Power distance refers to "the degree of inequality which people of a country view acceptable." A country can be high or low in power distance. If a country is high, it doesn't really see a problem with great differences in such things as the income level of people or in the distribution of power. Examples include Arab countries, Mexico, and West Africa. Low power distance countries don't find wide gaps in these areas acceptable. They tend to think that people should have equal rights (or have a more egalitarian view). Such countries include the United States, Germany, and Great Britain.

# Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is "the extent to which people in a given culture prefer structured situations with clear rules over unstructured ones." Once again, cultures can rank as either being high or low in this dimension. If a country scores as low, you'll probably find people who are easy going, not extremely rigid, and are willing to take risks. The opposite is true in places with high uncertainty avoidance.

# Individualism

Individualism "describes the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than group members." As you might imagine, cultures that score high on the individualism dimension are considered to be "me" societies. They focus on the interest of the individual. On the other side of the spectrum, you find the "we" cultures in which the interest of the group is of utmost importance. Closely related to this dimension is the concept of "self." People in high individualism societies find it natural for people to express themselves and discover their own unique qualities. They have an "independent view of the self." In societies where the group is more important, and "interdependent view of the self" exists. These people feel more comfortable with and want to be connected to others.

# Masculinity

Certain values are considered to be "male" and others "female." Assertiveness, success, the competitive drive, and achievement are male values. Values such as solidarity and concern about the quality of life are considered to be female. How important a country perceives the "male" values over the "female" defines its masculinity. Japan is considered to be a masculine country. Indonesia is considered to be female.

# Long-termism

This is a dimension that Hofstede uncovered while doing some additional research in Asia. It refers to whether a country's focus is on the long-term or short-term. The United States, for example scores low in this dimension. So do Great Britain and West Africa. These countries pay more attention to values that represent the past and present. Japan, on the other hand scores highly. Its values revolve around the future.

# High- vs. low-context cultures

The anthropologist, Edward Hall, developed a way to classify cultures based on how they communicate. According to this classification, cultures can be seen as high-context or low-context cultures. The book "Global Marketing Management" explains each in detail.

## **High-Context Cultures**

“Contextual cues” are key to understanding what is being said in high-context countries. These cues include the type of relationship that exist between the speaker and the listener. What is their age relative to each other? Their gender? The power quotient? Where is the communication taking place? In high-context cultures, much depends on what is left unsaid. China, Korea, Japan, Latin America, and to a certain extent, France, are considered to be high-context cultures.

## **Low-Context Cultures**

In low-context cultures, the “context” in which something is said isn’t as important. What someone says is usually what they mean. You have to listen to the words, read the writing. Although at times you often have to pay attention to non-verbal clues as well. The United States is a perfect example of a low-context country. So are Scandinavia and Germany.