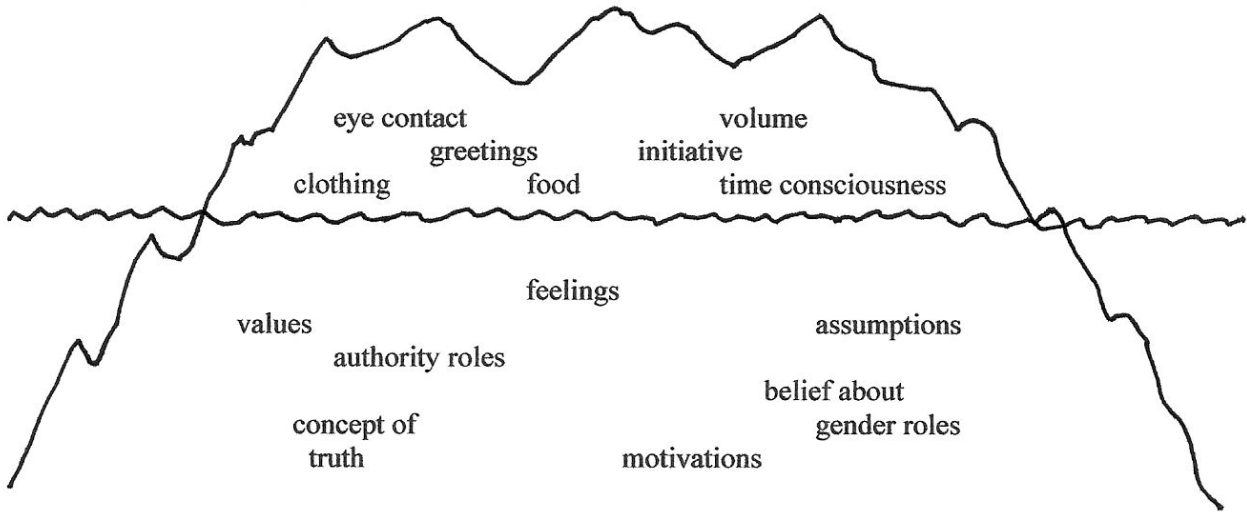


What is culture? Culture involves much more than the matter of how a person eats his food or greets his guest.

It is the ideas, customs, traditions, language, arts, belief systems, and social structures and norms of a given people that are learned and transmitted from generation to generation. A good definition of culture would be

The objective part is what is seen--like what a person wears or eats and how he greets others. The subjective is what drives or motivates that behavior--a person's values, beliefs, assumptions. Think of an iceberg: the top part is objective (seen) culture and the bottom part is the subjective (unseen) culture. Often when people move into a new culture, their objective culture begins to change, but the subjective culture often doesn't change.



The reasons are indeterminable: history, origin, technology, capitalism, Christianity. In some ways Americans share the same cultural values as all peoples of the world--love of family, respect for authority, allegiance to the state. However, in some ways American values are distinct.

How can cross-cultural relationships be started, nurtured and enjoyed? Begin by creating a healthy environment that produces trust.

1. Plan quality time together.
2. Ask open-questions.
3. Listen.
4. Be genuinely interested.
5. Share food together.
6. Partner in projects.
7. Create equal/reciprocal playing fields.
8. Learn about each other's culture/customs.

Avoiding Pitfalls and Misunderstanding)

Cultural differences aren't wrong--just different. Most cultural differences begin with the way people think rather than the way they act. Intercultural understanding is the basis for successful communication.

1. Everyone's culture is not the same.
When you meet people from other cultures, try to remember they may be like you in some ways but very different in others.
2. "Normal" may only be cultural.

People in the world share aspects of culture that are universal. However, it is best not to assume your culture is the norm.

3. Familiar behavior may have different meanings.
“Yes” may mean “I hear you,” not “I agree with you.” Check for signs the other person did or did not understand you. Give feed-back, encourage feedback.
4. You don’t have to like or accept “different” customs, but it’s helpful to try to discover the reason why they are different.
You may never get used to some of the things an international does just as he/she may not accept some American ways. Just remember we are the way we are because we all had different teachers.



1. When you speak:
 - Speak slowly and clearly.
 - Do not speak more loudly.
 - Keep natural rhythm of language.
 - Explain idioms and slang.
 - Don’t use unnecessary words.
 - Use a variety of words.
 - Look directly at the listener.
 - Ask open-ended questions.
2. Write or draw key concepts when oral communication breaks down.
3. Use other communication techniques:
 - Use facial expressions.
 - Use total body language.
 - Be animated.
4. Be a good listener: Give your full attention.
 - Be active--observe, acknowledge, encourage
 - Allow time for processing information. (Only rephrase when misunderstanding is indicated.)
 - Allow other person time for pauses and silences
5. Check for understanding:
 - Give feedback. (Spell out what you think you heard.)
 - Ask for feedback. (Ask that information be repeated and what a particular phrase or comment means.)
6. Be patient and kind, and look for humor in every situation.

✖ Tourists pay huge sums every year to get to exotic places--just so they can see those facets of culture and custom that are different from their own. Learning about culture also can make you more sensitive to people’s needs and thus a better communicator.

*Used by permission, Patty Lane, Director, Office of Intercultural Initiatives, BGCT

1 Adapted from “Culture and Customs,” Orientation Manual, Partnership Missions, BGCT, 1991.

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