

Cultural Differences Presentation and Discussion

(Note: This presentation is a very personal view of U.S. culture, as described by a Kentucky Refugee Ministries' guest speaker from the Louisville [KY] Metro Office of International and Cultural Affairs. The presenter came to the U.S. as an immigrant and knew no English before her arrival. Kentucky Refugee Ministries notes that having such a presenter, a non-native-born American, adds to the presenter's ability to perceive and describe American culture as the clients may.)

Introduction

Learning English is the #1 priority.

Important Customs

1. Be friendly, say "hello," and exchange personal greetings.
2. Businesspeople shake hands.
3. There is little physical contact: no kisses, little touching, and maybe a "hug" with a close friend, but such contact is rare in public (such as on a bus).
4. When talking, eye contact is important, unlike in many other cultures.
5. Eye contact is important in group situations as well.
6. Smiling is important in job interviews, and in service occupations.
(KRM's presenter notes that in her home country, a person who smiles like this is thought to be "crazy.")
7. Keep "personal space," a bubble of space approximately an "arm's length" away.
8. "Keep your distance" emotionally as well as physically.
9. Avoid personal questions re: money, age, prices, etc.
(KRM's presenter notes that, in many countries these topics are considered "normal." When faced with these topics, Americans will generally withdraw.)
10. Use a firm handshake.

Understand the American concept of TIME

1. "Time is money," thus no time for friends! "Not a single minute to miss, hurry!"
2. Punctuality is very different from concepts of times in other countries. Punctuality is important with both professional appointments and friends in the U.S.
3. Coming early shows respect.
4. If a person is to be late, call ahead-of-time and explain later.
5. Be on time for personal appointments (like a doctor's appointment, etc.).
6. Don't "DROP IN" to see the doctor, etc., or even to see FRIENDS.
7. To drink COFFEE is to share time with someone; this is generally not offered in business, but is common in friendly settings.
8. Wait for friendships to develop and be patient.

The need to ADAPT

1. Americans usually do not know about other cultures.
2. Be prepared to encounter misunderstandings.
3. Know each immigrant faces TWO CHOICES: to stay as one was in his/her former country OR to adapt.

Attitudes toward AGE

1. In many other countries older people are respected, valued, and consulted in public and personal matters. In the USA they are not seen as the source of advice or wisdom.
2. Work is vital. Here, people can work until they die.
3. In the USA nothing matters except PERFORMANCE: not age, not beauty.
4. Here, the old are separated, even isolated.

Identify oneself clearly.

1. Use “all the mouth” to speak clearly; Americans will imitate the facial movements and sounds.
2. WRITE a difficult name.
3. Give a business card, turning it properly so that it can be read.
4. Help Americans understand by speaking slowly.

The phone is the enemy!

1. Names are difficult; practice spelling clearly.
2. Don't hang up if people do not at first understand.
3. Learn critical phrases, such as “I don't speak English,” etc.
4. Be patient with Americans who try to speak Spanish, Arabic, etc.

At a restaurant...

1. Pay your own bill!
2. Agree to “go Dutch” (split the bill).
3. “Let's go eat” suggests that each person pays his own bill.

Personal Hygiene

1. Adopt the standards of this country.
2. Shower daily, use deodorant, comb hair well, SMELL CLEAN.
3. Avoid smelly foods, especially with garlic, etc.
4. Know that on the bus, etc., smelly people are poor, not professional.

National Dress

1. National dress is accepted only on special occasions, not in professional settings.
2. Ask if you have a question about attire or whether some article of clothing is appropriate.

Sounds

1. Don't be loud, and don't make wild gestures.
2. Consider neighbors and other people.
3. Be calm; accomplish more.

Foreigners are the Future!

1. Americans are not having babies!
2. Older people work, including women.
3. Foreigners will fill the work force.

Final Words

1. Learn English!
2. Get an education!
3. Be persistent! (“If you want it, you’ll get it! Do not take ‘No’ for an answer.”)