

CROSS-CULTURAL PREPARATION

In our zeal to 'experience' short-term missions and to make an impact on our world, we often cause a host of unintended and at times, unrealized problems. Pushing our culture on theirs could ruin the team's witness and ruin the chances of future teams being able or equipped to witness as well. Our goal is to make Christians, NOT North Americans. It is critical for leaders to be aware of how to recognize and avoid these pitfalls.

Whether you are going to a different city or a different continent, you will encounter some form of culture shock when leaving home. Unfortunately, the way things are done in 'our world' forms the basis for the way we believe things "should be done" in the rest of the world. Nothing is more damaging to ministry than turning people away from the message by offending them or their culture by something we do or say. We need to stay open as to how other cultures are different. To be effective in ministry, we should move from judgment-passing to diversity-embracing.

Teams must remember that they are subject to the authority, vision and goals of the local leadership. We should never go in telling our hosts how things need to be done. That is not partnership. That is paternalism and will create all kinds of dependencies. In addition, it takes away local ownership of the ministry. When the team leaves in one or two weeks, the team's vision and goals go home with them, often leaving a confused and defeated community. Remember, we go in as a servant, a guest and a student. We go to serve them and to further their goals and what they have determined to be the direction that God wants them to take. We are their guests and as a result, need to respect their culture and country. Finally, we go to learn about our hosts, their culture and their struggles so that we can participate in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world.

Remember to consider how the team's actions will influence the community after you leave. The key is having God's motives in mind, not man's.

Encourage your teams to delve into worldview. Remember – things are different, not weird. You will want to brief teams on the host culture as much as possible before going. And help team members to see the reasons behind why another culture does things the way they do them. A good way to set the tone is to do a devotional with the team on Philippians 2.

Worldview & Culture

Worldview is the framework you use to explain life around you. Each culture has behaviors that define what is done, values that define what is good, and beliefs that define what is true. This makes a **WORLDVIEW** that defines what is **REAL**.

Functions of Worldview

Worldview explains how and why the world came to be as it is and how it continues.
Worldview provides ways of judging and validating different actions and institutions.
Worldview provides psychological reinforcement during times of crisis.
Worldview is an integrator providing comprehensive uniform explanation of reality.

Worldview is your framework for explaining life around you. You probably have not given it much thought, but your worldview shapes the cultures in which you operate.

The Cultural Iceberg

Each culture is like an iceberg. Behaviors, values and beliefs are part of the iceberg, but only some of these are evident. Those that are "below the waterline" you know, but have not necessarily names or recognized their existence and impact on your culture.

What's in the tip of the iceberg?

Language, architecture, food, population, music, art and literature, clothing, pace of life, emotional display, gestures, leisure activities, eye contact, sports

What's in the bottom of the iceberg?

Notions of time, beliefs about human nature, rules of relationships, motivations for achievement, leadership styles, communication styles, linear vs. systematic thinking

Common Triggers of Cultural Stress

Cultural Stress: The day-to-day stress that occurs in new or changing situations creating doubt, frustration, short-temper, sleeplessness, and anxiety.

During an overseas trip you experience an initial culture shock that is replaced almost immediately with culture stress. You need to know ways to act, how to get things done, and how to respond to others around you. Culture stress grows as you encounter situations that are contrary to your expectation of what "ought" to be.

Triggers of culture stress include unfamiliar styles of: courtesy, charity, comfort, communication, control, cleanliness, and conclusion making. See the following for an example of our thought process and triggers.

Process of Cultural Stress

We expect others to be like us
(but they are not)



Cultural Incident occurs

Type I: We expect others to behave as we do, but they don't
Type II: We assume we behave like everyone else, but we don't



Causing a reaction
(fear, anxiety, anger, etc)



We choose a strategy...



We react without thinking.



We begin to harbor pain.



Develop, or reinforce negative stereotypes.



We become aggressive or we begin to withdraw.



We become aware of our reaction.



We reflect on it's cause.



Our reaction has sides.



We observe the situation.



We adjust our expectations appropriately.

Culture Shock Triggers

(What We May Experience)

Courtesy

All smiles, bowing, tea drinking; asking overly personal questions; no one respecting lines/no queues; pushing to get on buses; charging American prices

Comfort

No air conditioning or ice for drinks; no hot water; beds are hard or made of straw; no water pressure; no easy way to wash clothes; it's so noisy – the roosters start at 5 am! The call to prayer wakes me up!

Charity

Beggars are everywhere – do you ignore them? How can you help the local believers? My leaders told me not to give gifts to nationals without permission.

Communication

No one speaks clear English; they just smile and laugh at us; people point at us all the time; can't order what I want at restaurants; can't make a phone call; can't find a phone; I can't read the street signs.

Control

Meetings never start on time; plans keep changing; what our leaders told us last night has already changed this morning; no one seems to be in charge; chaos is everywhere.

Cleanliness

Can't drink water from the tap; garbage is everywhere; bugs, flies, mosquitoes and ants are everywhere; children with runny noses, ringworm and open sores are everywhere, open markets with unrefrigerated food

Culture Shock Responses

(How We Should Respond)

Courtesy

Follow the lead of your host culture; take the time necessary to build relationships; be patient and flexible; think about answers to personal questions ahead of time; try to understand the reasons behind American prices.

Comfort

Pack comfortable clothes and shoes; learn how to take a 30-second shower; shower in the evening when the water might not be as cold; pack a travel pillow.

Charity

Remember that the beggar is loved by God; smile and acknowledge that the beggar is a person; ask leaders and hosts how to respond; talk to leaders and hosts about ways to give to those in need.

Communication

Memorize useful phrases and words before leaving or when you first get there; carry a pen and paper to write down phrases; settle for what you get rather than what you want – see ordering as an adventure; ask for help with phones and anything else you need.

Control

Use waiting time, or unplanned free time, to get to know the locals; be flexible and enjoy unscheduled opportunities; take unplanned time to write in journals or pray; trust God – let Him be in charge.

Cleanliness

Always have bottled water with you; concentrate on the beautiful things you see, not the ugly; remember that children are victims of terrible poverty – start hugging them; eat only food your leaders say is safe; learn a polite way to say no to unsafe food.

CROSS CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

1. Listen and observe carefully: Be sensitive to factors which complicate communication and diminish mutual understanding. Look for logical reasons behind actions which seem strange or confusing. Look for patterns and interrelationships within the culture. Be aware. Don't assume that you always know what is going on – remember that there are new rules and clues that may be unfamiliar to you.
2. Try not to evaluate: The natural tendency to immediately attach a 'good' or 'bad' label to all you observe or experience can be a major stumbling block to understanding a new culture. Observe and describe. Look at the host nationals' situation from their cultural perspective. Try to empathize.
3. Suspend judgment in conflict situations: Avoid judgment until all the facts are in. Try to give the host nationals the benefit of your doubts and have faith in their goodwill.
4. Resist temptation to speak critically with other expatriates: Avoid socializing/ talking in host country with Americans and other foreigners inclined to be critical of host culture.
5. Learn to express yourself correctly: Each culture has a pattern for expression of both ideas and feelings which people in that culture can understand. Try to tune into that pattern – both verbally and non-verbally. Check your meanings – rephrase and recheck when necessary.
6. Learn and use the language: Even if you can't speak perfectly, your attempts to communicate in native language indicate that you are trying to learn and adjust. Your patience and perseverance will be appreciated.
7. Recognize that anxiety is normal: There may be much stress in trying to live in a new culture and communicate with people there. Openness, a willingness to take risks, and ability to laugh at your mistakes can help you reduce the anxiety and stress in your life.
8. Learn more about the new culture: Gather information assiduously. Learn about that country's history, homes, religion, ceremonies/celebrations, foods, gift giving practices. Society taboos, dress customs, health services available, educational system, and attitudes.
9. Become involved: Show your willingness to become involved, to try new experiences, to take part in the culture with the people.
10. Develop a friendship with a host national who seems sympathetic and who has some understanding/acceptance of the US and their own culture. Talk of difference's between cultures, especially in regards to specific situations and your feelings.