



MISSION POSSIBLE

Equipping the Next Generation of Christ Centered Leaders

Team Member Guide

Cross Cultural Issues

Culture Defined:¹

"Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them."²

"Culture has been defined in a number of ways, but most simply, as the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings."³

Cultural Examples:

What Time Is It?

An important dynamic that affects the interaction of Short Term Mission teams and low-income communities is that there are often core cultural differences with respect to time. Most Americans are from a *monochronic* culture which believes that time is a very important resource that should not be wasted. Of course, there is some good in that perspective, and it enables Americans to produce a lot. But many other cultures have a *polychronic* view that says time is primarily an opportunity to invest in relationships. In such cultures, knowing and serving others is more important than pursuing many new projects or activities. Hence, people from polychronic cultures may not feel unduly impatient or burdened if life unfolds a little bit slower than the people from monochronic cultures would like.⁴

In general, Haitian time is divided into 30 minute segments. Schedules happen on the hour or half hour. To meet at 8:15 am is unusual. It will be either 8:00 or 8:30.

Meal Time Conversation...

Meal time conversation is minimal. Conversation will be before or after the meal.

Personal Space...

Personal space in Haiti and the DR is very different than it is here in the U.S. We are used to having space between us and another; especially a stranger. This is not true there. People come right up to you standing or sitting very close. There is no hidden meaning to this. This is just how they are. Having people this close to me was surprising and felt really strange at first.

¹ The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) "What is Culture?" <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html> (accessed August 19, 2008).

² Lederach, J.P. (1995). Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. Page 9.

³ Useem, J., & Useem, R. (1963). *Human Organizations*, 22(3). Page 169.

⁴ The Chalmers Center "Doing Short-Term Missions without Doing Long-Term Harm" *Mandate* eNewsletter, 2008 - Issue #1. http://www.chalmers.org/staging/mandate/april_2008/stm.php (accessed August 19, 2008).

Signs of Respect...

- Children or students will cross their arms when listening to their teacher or another adult.
- When being spoken to, children or students will not look an adult in the eye.
- Children or younger people will address those older than themselves as Uncle, Aunt, or Mom.
- Crossed legs that show the sole of the shoe are disrespectful.

A Gift for Me?

The giving of items to an individual can be interpreted differently. For instance, an item given to an individual from a team member can be seen as an item given to the individual and not to the organization for which they work.

If a team travels with packs of colored paper to be used in the schools and a team member gives some of the paper to a teacher with the intent that she use it in her classroom, the teacher may assume that this is a personal gift and not feel the obligation to use it in the classroom. However, if the same paper is given to the teacher by the school director, the teacher will see that it is for school use and know that it is for the organization and not her personally.

This is one reason why items should not be given directly to nationals. All items to be used in country should flow through the Mission Possible leadership – i.e. Pastors Herve or Moise.

What did you bring?

In the excitement to help and provide resources hard to find, team members may want to talk with the local staff about the items brought in-country. Items such as school supplies, medical supplies, thumb drives, books, etc. are frequently brought in with the team. Talking about these supplies can cause problems.

When talking about such supplies, the local staff may assume that the supplies were brought in to give away for free. Many times this is not the case. Supplies brought in-country are to be distributed as the national leaders see fit. In many cases, our leaders will ask that the person receiving the supplies contribute in some way before getting them.

If the team talks about the supplies in public, and then later the leadership charges a fee for the supplies, this can cause problems as the public may assume the leadership is charging a fee and keeping the money for the supposedly free supplies. Any money collected by the leadership for supplies is always used to cover the cost of the supplies or reused for ministry purposes. Conversation about team supplies should always come through the national leadership.

Wow, you are a great worker!

A comment such as this from a North American team member can be construed to mean that the complimented worker always does good work. This may not be the case.

When working along side nationals, it is best to just thank them for their time when the work is complete. **Any evaluation of their work should be avoided.** This is hard because we want to encourage good work. Avoid phrases such as, “You are a hard worker.” Or “Your work is so good.” Or “I really like the way that you work. You are good at what you do.”

Leave all work review and evaluation to our national leaders.

Culture reflected in worldview

The General principle for effective cross-cultural ministry

In Martha VanCise’s book *Successful Mission Teams: A Guide for Volunteers*, she writes two particularly good sections. One is on teamwork. The other is on building cross-cultural relationships. The following thoughts and information comes from this later section.

VanCise writes, “One requirement of building solid cross-cultural relationships is a servant attitude” (161). Cultures are very different and as you read the following section, North Americans can have the attitude that we are superior in intelligence, know-how, and work ethic. Our cultures promote this independent, pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality. This works in our culture, but can be very offensive in other cultures.

What does this servant attitude look like? **For starters, it is a realization that another’s culture is more complex than it first appears.** Never make assumptions about another’s culture. Be an observer, not a problem solver. Take time to watch, learn, and support those native to the culture. In seven to ten days, you will not be able to solve all the “problems” of a culture. You are unable to totally solve your own culture’s problems. Mission Possible’s purpose is to train leaders from within cultures to effect change through Christ-centered lifestyles and leadership.

Second, the servant attitude avoids condescending attitudes. “Guard against a superior attitude in regard to your education, possessions, and spiritual life. Avoid acting toward others as if they are ignorant or inferior. Look for similarities in your culture and the culture you are visiting” (163).

Third, the servant respects the cultures’ customs and taboos. Even when they seem unfair or unjust to you, they may be well accepted and non-threatening in the other culture. Seating arrangements are an example. You will probably be given priority seating as you visit churches and other locations on your trip. Accept these places of honor even if others around you have to stand or are moved because of your coming.

A servant is loving and receives well. As you meet new people, greet them warmly and properly. We will have specific discussion on what is appropriate and inappropriate greetings. “Always be very careful about responses to food. Do not make casual jokes, faces, laughs, mumbled comments, or other derogatory gestures when presented with food or drink” (166). Show interest in the lives and lifestyles of those you visit.

A servant works in cooperation with others and does not “take charge” because he or she knows how to do it better, quicker, or with more skill. Yes, you may know a better way. Yes, you may be able to do it quicker and yes, you may have more skill. But, don’t take over as our culture would encourage. Our objective is to be able to learn together with those we meet. A “know it all” is hard to get along with. “It is better to work in harmony then to complete the job” (166).

A servant looks to provide for his or her own needs. Don’t expect to be waited on hand and foot. Look for ways that you can contribute. Yet, at the same time, be a gracious recipient. This is a delicate balance. Receive when it is given, yet, don’t expect it all to be given to you.

Culture Shock⁵

Every person traveling overseas experiences culture shock in one way or another. Whether you feel it in a mild or extreme way depends greatly on your length of stay, where you travel, and on your previous overseas experience. Culture shock isn’t a bad thing. God uses it to stretch our view of the world, our view of people, and challenge our personal day-to-day values. Some people feel it while overseas, some upon returning home, and others in both environments. The lessons you learn from traveling will not end the moment you set foot on familiar ground. Be ready to have your life shaken up a bit. Get excited!

Engage them...

Mission trips are all about people. People are the reason we go. You will encounter many “nationals” who would be more than happy to help you learn about their culture. Be an initiator. Ask questions free of criticism or judgment. You aren’t from this culture—don’t act as if you’ve got it all figured out. Be willing to be “in the dark” and admit you don’t understand things. You’ll learn so much more if you don’t fake it! Learn to laugh at yourself. Everyone will make cultural mistakes—learn to apologize and move on. Your hosts will appreciate your effort to learn. Be engaging in your conversations; investigate things as if studying for a final exam. Spend time with them— develop relationships with your interpreters, national team leaders/coordinators, and host families. Give of yourself and you will receive back a hundred fold.

Learn from them...

Rather than going as “doers,” some powerful dynamics can be unleashed if teams go as “learners” from the poor or as “co-learners” with the poor. Consistent with an asset-based model, going as a learner emphasizes the gifts which poor people have to share with

⁵ GLCA (Great Commission Latin America) Faith Ventures Short Term Missions Training Manual. Pages 5-7. http://www.reachinglatinos.com/Downloads/Training_Manual.pdf (accessed August 18, 2008).

others: the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social resources that God has already placed in their community. Listening to poor people and asking them to share their insights affirms their dignity and reduces the tendencies towards pride on the part of the outsiders. Furthermore, the poor really do have something to teach us, for they have unique insights on what it means to trust in a sovereign God to “give us this day our daily bread.”⁶

Enjoy their home!

Enjoy the culture. Celebrate the differences—God made them! The variety of peoples, ways of doing things, foods, dress, manners, etc., are all wonderful expressions of God’s creativity. In other cultures, people think differently and look at life differently. Try to find the instructive elements of that difference and challenge your own way of thinking. Learn to see the similarities and bridges between your home and their home, between you and them. Your hosts are giving you the best they have.

Adapt yourself...

No matter what country you visit, you will need to examine your behavior—how you speak, act, dress, work, etc. Be thoughtful—consider yourself a work-in-progress, needing continual editing. Be humble and quick to adapt to the advice or direction of your team leader or national leadership. Try to learn appropriate manners—your team leader will help, but take your own steps to find out customs and interpersonal relations. Always demonstrate respect for age and status. Adapt to their view of time. Dress modestly, in accordance with cultural rules and with appropriate attire for the job you are doing. (Please make sure you note the dress and attire requirements from Mission Possible. These requirements are for the benefit of the nationals *and* the team members.) Live and travel simply. Try not to look like the “rich North American.” Find out where and when you can take pictures—before taking them! The culture is likely to be much more group-oriented than yours. Seek to live above reproach in regard to the opposite sex. Singles especially should refrain from exclusive relationships and display of too much affection. Watch what you say, your gestures and facial expressions.

Be aware of stereotyping

Stereotypes may make us feel superior, safe, in control, or knowledgeable, but they will never lead to genuine, loving, truthful interactions with other people. You may not think you have any stereotypes, that’s great! However, being on foreign soil may quickly reveal attitudes and perceptions previously unknown. That’s part of the overseas experience. Be honest with yourself and with fellow team members as you recognize stereotypes in your mind and heart. Talk with each other about it. You will surely find that you are not alone in your misperceptions, and discussion will help you move beyond “typing” people to genuine friendships.

⁶ Inserted in this training material from - The Chalmers Center “Doing Short-Term Missions without Doing Long-Term Harm” *Mandate* eNewsletter, 2008 - Issue #1.
http://www.chalmers.org/staging/mandate/april_2008/stm.php (accessed August 19, 2008).

North Americans⁷ may have these ideas about people in other countries

Negative

Uneducated⁸
Superstitious
Inefficient
Greedy/corrupt
Naive
Lazy/Backward
Inflexible
Needing of help

Positive

Having good families
Friendly
Sincere
Content
Enthusiastic

People from other countries often hold these ideas about North Americans

Negative

Loud/arrogant
Having superior attitudes
Aggressive
Wealthy/materialistic
Corrupt
Violent
Demanding
Competitive/selfish

Positive

Confident
Educated
Efficient
Strong
Successful
Good in business

What stereotypes do you have of people from other countries?

⁷ “In North America, we are so isolated that we make the additional mistake of thinking that our way of doing things is the best way, that our lifestyle is best, and that our language is best. All of these assumptions are not only wrong; but they work against us in trying to be what God wants us to be.” (Steve Saint, *The Great Omission*, page 83)

⁸ “It is amazingly easy to make the dangerous assumption that people without formal education lack intelligence and capability.” (Steve Saint, *The Great Omission*, page 78)

If you are speaking through an interpreter...

- Speak in short, slow, distinct phrases, not long sentences. Avoid slang.
- Be careful with your humor. Play on words and jokes often do not translate well.
- Bible translations will vary. You may focus on a certain word in the English Bible, only to find it translated differently in their Bible.
- Remember that many times the translation is done for the idea being expressed and not word for word.

Common ground and connections

- God's love is unconditional, perfect, eternal, personal, beyond our understanding, measureless, limitless, and generous. It is not prejudiced and has no favorites. He loves others just as much as he loves you.
- The love of Christ is able to bridge any and all cultural differences.
- All human beings desire to be valued, loved and appreciated for who they are.
- God's gifts of sports, music, art and drama can powerfully connect people across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Take advantage of opportunities in these and other areas to build friendships.
- Extending kindness and respect speaks loudly in any language.
- Every person on the face of the planet desperately needs to know Jesus Christ.



Always feel free to talk with your team leader with any cultural questions or concerns.

Notes: