



Cultural Differences: *Workshop Outline*¹

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Objectives:

1. To explore the existence and types of “cultural differences” and consider several reasons why they are important to understand in cross-cultural facilitator/consultant training.
2. To examine three skills essential to understanding cultural differences.
3. To examine eight cultural differences that will most affect the cross-cultural consultant/facilitator.
4. To evaluate and apply this understanding in a group task.

Procedure

Begin with several role-plays depicting various entry postures when crossing cultures, and illustrating different approaches to entering and receiving others: Culture A: Western culture (3 participants)
Culture B: Asian culture (3 participants)

Scene 1: A approaches B with fists held out; B becomes defensive.

Scene 2: A approaches with open hands, while B are holding hands. B doesn't want to break hand to include A; A persists and finally B let's them join hands (on their terms); their standards are more important than ours when entering another culture.

Scene 3: A brings their chairs over to B and sit in chairs in a small group surrounded by B's standing around outside; A's conversing and saying nice things about Asia, etc. Reminds one of British colonial days. A did not integrate with B's; merely set up small American/UK enclave.

Scene 4: B's think of something they want to show to A's. (B's plan a long time.) B's come over to A's, bow, and make proper introductions all around, trying to communicate warmth, acceptance, and respect for A's.

Scene 5: A's run over and hug B's. B's are shocked, taken aback. Illustrates 'culture shock.' Comment: “You came on too/so strong!” A's were evangelists, “Loving you for Jesus!” Entering communicators must adjust their style to the reality of the host culture, so as to not misuse the opportunity.

Scene 6: A's saunter in slowly, chatting quietly among themselves. Gradually stand side-by-side with B's. Informally listen, and begin conversations. Pick up on cues and learn from B's. As they learn and come closer, adapt to their posture, gestures, etc. Approached personally; asked questions about B; shared about themselves.

Ethnocentrism: Americans like information; they are very curious. “Don't ask a fish how it feels to live in the water.” They have only lived in water, and know nothing about any other way of life.

¹ Ted Ward. Cultural Differences. Cross-cultural Consultants Workshop, World Vision, December 17, 1987

People who live in only one culture have little idea of what it is like to be of that culture.

What is the meaning (or essential nature) of your own culture? What does it mean to be (Indian, American, Korean)? For people who have never been outside their own culture, it is very difficult to describe.

Putting yourself outside your culture to gain a better perspective:

“It is important to see our culture more clearly by viewing differences in other cultures we encounter. e.g., Scientists used to say earth was a “green planet” because of the vegetation around us until space exploration enabled us to look back to see earth as actually much more blue than green. We have seen it from an outside vantage point. We put ourselves outside and look back to gain a different perspective. It is often difficult to understand one’s own culture until one has been outside and looked back, and then re-entered one’s own culture.

Why be concerned about cultural differences? What is the purpose of cross-cultural training? (To reduce barriers.) Toward what result? So that we can all be alike? No! So that we can work together with better understanding.

In general, cultural difference is a we/they matter. Cultural difference means:

- We see things differently from them.
- We like things different from them.
- We behave differently from them (e.g., we get up later, and start work later; they get up earlier. We go to bed late; they go to bed early).
- We as outsiders must adjust or adapt to them, not expect the hosts to change (e.g., “We speak slowly, but they speak faster”).
- The adjustment should be/must be made by the one entering the culture. This is not always easy. Never do we “fit” exactly. But making the effort is key!

Not all interpersonal differences are cultural differences. Other sources of difference:

Personality: Certain matters of personality (people) are problematic (difficult to get along with) even in one’s own culture. What is true of your personality that makes you different? Is the effect of each of these matters positive or negative? The issue is not becoming “Australian”, but adapting to the host culture wherever you are.

Professional Responsibility: The role one plays in one’s own culture can effect interactions in the host culture.

Some matters become “sub-cultural” even within our own society:

Religion: The status and values of a particular religion and the degree of fervency differ widely.

Education: The status and focus of interests and vocabulary.

Regionality: The differences of geography, vocations, dialect, and customs that are produced even in one generation (e.g., food: it is possible for people not to like some food of our culture. This is more of an individual “taste” than a cultural difference).

What are some of the dominant sub-cultural distinctives of your lifestyle?

The experienced cross-cultural consultant uses three skills:

1. *Assesses* cultural factors, watching carefully for differences as evident in others and in one's self. Examples include:

- If I work from the perspective of self as the norm, then other people are always "different."
- Parallel growth in "perspectivism" in a young child's growth from egocentrism to perspectivism. How can I get my thoughts into the frame of reference or perspective of another person? Perspectivism is a skill which can be developed! Some people are not good at assessing: knowing what is different.

2. *Evaluates* the importance of each matter of difference to self and to others.

- Certain matters make others uncomfortable. So we want and need to be sensitive as to which issues are so important as to make others uncomfortable. For example, the level of dress formality is very important in the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta; jeans and thongs would not make the proper impression.
- Certain things of importance in my culture, become unimportant in another culture, or vice versa. For example, formality necessary in speech or sermon vs. our desire for informality.

Observing is an important skill in evaluating: Look for trends. Look around the next restaurant you are in. Look around your living room to discover patterns.

3. *Adapts* to the culture of the others, through self-control, adjustment, and accommodation; submitting oneself to the important cultural norms of others while carefully holding to one's own important values. What about questions of moral principle? Submitting is the key—it is more Christian to be concerned with adapting to their ways (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Major categories of cultural difference that affect the cross-cultural consultant:

1. *Worldview and Cosmology* (how the world is structured and its differences): For example, Americans are concerned with and interested in cause and effect—Why? Who did that? Muslims will more commonly say, "It is the will of Allah."

2. *Use of Time and Space*: For example, for westerners time is considered to be a limited commodity. "Do you have enough time to . . . ?" Westerners like to use as much space as available. Americans for instance rarely sit next to others in a theater by choice. They like space, they like to stretch out. Indonesians on the other hand have an open view of time

3. *Interpersonal Style*: For example, Asians will get close, but it is selective; certain people can move in close, others cannot. Americans, on the other hand, tend to hug any number of people, regardless of degree of familiarity.

4. *Style of Reasoning*: Reasoning may be dominantly linear for westerners, and more holistic for other cultures.

5. *Rituals of Conversation*: Americans tend to ask direct questions, make speeches, and share too much personal information. Other cultures are indirect, the subtext is important, relationship is important.

6. *Food Choices and Food Rituals*: Most people feel strongly about their habitual choices for food. People from all cultures may take offense when people from a different culture will not try certain foods or engage appropriately in certain rituals. Food is socially important: I don't have to enjoy it, but I should not be offensive. Food also has religious significance in different cultures.

7. *Standards for Affiliation* (closeness): We may find it easy to associate with any Christian. We say we believe in the unity of believers; yet certain groups of people may refuse to act in this way—those from cultures with a caste system for example.

8. *Aesthetics*: Dress, grooming, odor (for example, frequency of bathing is an issue to most Americans; when water is scarce in Africa, for instance, we may need to adapt and accept odor because there is so little water. However, when Africans come to places with abundant water, they should be sensitive to and adjust to odor problems which could be avoided with available water. For certain cultures, food consumed creates a distinctive odor which is often noticed by a person from a different culture. Some may find the odor problematic.

Group Task:

1. Select three categories from the above list.
2. For *each* category identify *two specific differences*.
3. For *each* specific difference consider and assess the following:
 - Is this difference *important*?
 - Is it more important to the “insiders” or the “outsider”?
 - What can the *outsider* do to adjust to the insiders?

Remember: As consultants, *we* are outsiders, and need to adjust to the insiders (them).

Resources

David J. Hesselgrave. Seven Dimensions of Cross-cultural Communication. In *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978.

Ted Ward. *Living Overseas*. New York: Free Press, 1984.