

The U.S. as a (Very Strange) Foreign Destination

Anne P. Copeland, PhD

Many Americans tend to have a rather distorted view of what it's like to move to the United States from another country. The land of opportunity, the land of plenty, the land of super-sized cola drinks—what's not to like?

If you've spent time talking to newcomers to this country, of course, you know that they have plenty of concerns: violence, poor math scores, school shootings, materialism, commercialism. These problems make it easy to understand a newcomer's worries. What human resources can offer expatriates to the United States is the same kind of knowledge, tips, and assistance we find for ourselves as Americans in dealing with these very real social concerns. But there's a hidden challenge for those of us who work to support newcomers to the United States—that is, dealing with those aspects of U.S. culture that Americans hold dear, the ones we love—but that are not universally embraced, for example:

- How does “rugged individualism” look to a person from a culture built on valuing group loyalty?
- Why does American-style friendliness feel like intrusiveness to some?
- How do people from other countries respond to Americans' optimism and confidence in their ability to control the future?
- What is the “honest” thing to do (and why are Americans' answers to this question so different from those who hail from some other cultures)?

These questions form the backdrop to every moment of a newcomer's relocation into the United States. As they set up an account with the electric company, enroll their children in school, find a doctor they trust, or try to meet their neighbors, they do so in the context of profoundly differ-

ent values. Here are a few examples of values Americans tend not to question, and a peek at how they look from another point of view.

Treat Everyone the Same

There is hardly any more venerable sentiment than this one in the United States. That “all [people] are created equal” is deeply engrained in the American consciousness. Of course, ours is not a culture without inequality; examples of unfair discrimination are abundant and persistent. But we continue to believe that everyone *should* be treated the same. Using family influence to get a job, win a contract, or gain admission to a university is something that lies between embarrassing and illegal in the United States. If a politician uses family influence to avoid the draft, it is a political liability from which recovery is uncertain. When a celebrity's son is arrested for drug use, the public watches carefully to ensure that he gets no preferential treatment. It's not that power inequalities do not exist in the United States. They do, but they are something we consider shameful that should be hidden.

This perspective is not shared in all cultures. Geert Hofstede¹ describes countries as differing in “power distance,” that is, “the extent to which the less power members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” Comparing IBM employees in cultures around the world on this dimension, Hofstede found:

- Malaysia and Mexico were particularly high in power distance (that is, accepting inequality).
- Denmark and Austria were particularly low (rejecting inequality).
- The United States scored 16th from the lowest among 53 countries studied.

1 Hofstede, G., *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, (McGraw Hill 1991).

According to Hofstede, in high power distance cultures, people are less likely to fight against things like inside influence, executive privileges, and lack of social mobility, seeing them as inevitable and natural. In fact, within this cultural perspective, accepting power inequality provides a certain familiar comfort.

People also differ in what they consider to be the “fair and honest” way to treat people. “Universalists” tend to make decisions about fairness in some absolute sense: what is “right” is right no matter who is involved. “Particularists,” in contrast, are more likely to consider the social context in making fairness decisions—that is, to value heavily their obligations to friends and family, and to consider these when making decisions. Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner² showed that cultures tend to differ along this dimension. They asked people in 31 countries to say whether they would lie to the authorities in order to protect a friend from legal consequences:

- Americans tended to say “no, absolutely not” (universalists).
- Venezuelans and South Koreans scored as particularists, saying “yes—my obligation to my friend is sufficiently serious that I would do that.”

Consider anew, then, how to view an employee who has used family influence to win a contract or to get a job. Answer: it depends on one’s cultural values.

Be Really Friendly

It is surely true in every culture that it’s good to be “friendly.” But what does friendliness look like around the world? What is the “nice” way to treat a stranger? How much about your personal life do you tell someone you’ve just met? How do you address your boss? Your secretary? Your child’s teacher? Your elderly neighbor? How do you signal someone that you’d like to be friends?

Americans tend to show their friendliness by self-disclosing early and often. What we see as openness and disarming sincerity may be received as a shocking onslaught of unsolicited intimacy. A Japanese friend related an incident in which an American woman had confided in her—within 30 minutes of having met—that she had recently adopted a daughter from another country. I presume the American felt some combination of excitement and joy and saw no reason not to share it. My friend, though, was shaken by her revelation about this family matter, which she felt should be kept private.

Americans also signal their intent to be friendly (and promote equality in relationships) by addressing people using their given names. When I call you Jane and you call me Anne, we are saying, subtly, “You and I are equals, and the path is clear to develop an egalitarian friendship. And what is important about us is our individual identities, designated by our given—not our family—names.”

Consider how this feels to my Korean friend, who is used to being addressed in a way that communicates her social role (“Heejin’s Mommy” or “Auntie” or “Mrs. Lee”). When she addresses her Korean peers this way, they are saying to each other, subtly, “You and I respect each other, and the path is clear for us to develop a relationship that reflects our roles and social values. And what is important about us is the connections we have to others.” When a young American man uses her given name (surely with the intent of being friendly), she feels intruded upon and insulted.

What to Do

These are just two examples of the many ways in which we can miscommunicate our intent by not understanding another person’s cultural values. There are scores of others; consider, for example, the different value cultures put on a direct commu-

2 Trompenaars, F. and Hampden-Turner, C., *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business* (McGraw Hill 1998).

nication style, individualism, punctuality, or an internal locus of control. In each case, core differences spawn countless behavioral and attitudinal surprises for newcomers to the United States and the Americans who live and work with them.

Corporations engaged in sending employees abroad can address this potential minefield by offering cross-cultural training to international

transferees and multicultural workforce cultural awareness training to its U.S. employees. And remember, next time you hear from a recent newcomer about some surprise he or she has encountered in the United States, dig down and look for the cultural root of the person's assumptions vs. yours. The discussion will be enlightening for you both.

Anne P. Copeland, PhD, is Executive Director of The Interchange Institute, a nonprofit research organization in Brookline, Massachusetts, whose mission is to study and support people in intercultural transition. The Interchange Institute offers numerous publications for newcomers to the US, as well as corporate cross-cultural training and train-the-trainer workshops. For more information, visit www.interchangeinstitute.org.

BENCHMARKING AVAILABLE FROM ORC WORLDWIDE

Is your expatriate policy competitive?

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- Examine the fit between your policies and overall business objectives
- Identify areas where improvements or cost savings make sense
- Understand evolving trends
- Define policy changes necessary to maintain competitiveness

How does the ORC benchmarking process work?

Step One

Measure your existing policy against the desired comparator group:

- By region
- By industry
- By a custom group of companies

ORC draws from our *Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices*—the industry's largest and most prestigious—and other major ORC surveys (e.g., expatriate housing policies, short-term assignments, dual careers). Individualized surveys can also be designed to meet your needs.

Step Two

Develop recommendations in a comprehensive report:

Sample policy line item

Policy Item & Current Company Practice	Competitive Practice from Selected Comparator Group
<i>Home Leave: Current policy practice is to provide business class airfare for all home leave trips.</i>	<i>20% Only provide Business Class for flights over 8 hours</i>
	<i>80% Provide Economy Class for all home leave flights</i>

Comments/Recommendations

Consider providing coach/ economy class airfare for home leave trips, or use business class only when the flight exceeds 8 hours.

Competitive benchmarking gives you the concrete data you need—backed by solid research and expert advice—that will serve as a solid foundation for policy change. Take a look at your competition to find out how your company measures up.

Let ORC benchmark your policies so you can remain competitive.