

UNIT 3

EXERCISE 4

Understanding Culture and Its Impact in the Workplace

- Objective:** The purpose of this activity is to define culture and to look at what aspects of culture affect people at work.
- Time:** 20 minutes
- Materials:**
- Flipchart and marker
 - Lecture, "What Culture Means"
 - * Handout
- Procedure:**
1. Ask participants to suggest words that describe "Culture." Some examples are physical features, dress, language, food, attitudes and values.
 2. Record the responses on the flipchart and offer a definition of culture as used in Lecture (or use any other source you prefer).
 3. Present the Lecture (or make up one of your own).
 4. Divide participants into small groups and ask them to discuss their own cultural backgrounds. Have the group talk about any situations that they have either experienced personally or know of, resulting from cultural differences. (**See Facilitator's Notes.**)
 5. Reconvene and have the groups summarize and report out on their discussions.
- Learning Point:** Often organizations impose rules and regulations that call for people to change some of the behaviors they value. In some cases people are willing to conform to cultural norms and in other cases either they cannot or do not desire to do so. It is important to be aware of what you are willing to change. This may have a tremendous impact on the type of work and the culture of the organization you choose.
- Facilitator's Notes:** If groups need prompting in their discussions, you might suggest that they talk about negative references to their culture, or other cultures, heard in the workplace. They may also want to talk about any issues that conflict with their values and beliefs. Provide several examples such as "People call me names because of old stereotypes." "I'm penalized for holidays that aren't recognized by the mainstream but are important to me." "I can't get what I like to eat from the vending machines." "I'm expected to work excessive overtime and feel resentful because it takes me away from my family."

UNIT 3

LECTURE 5

What Culture Means

In the Concise *Columbia Encyclopedia*, the word "Culture" is defined as "A way of life of a given society, passed down from one generation to the next through learning and experience." If we consider this definition, along with the other words selected by the group, it becomes apparent that "culture" goes deeper than the definition that normally comes to mind. It is a complex subject, but it is sometimes broadly described as "The way we do things around here." Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their culture and they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with circumstances.

Culture impacts every aspect of life from the way people behave with one another to their relationship to the natural environment. It includes beliefs and values as well as assumptions and perceptions. With this in mind it is easy to see how cultural clashes often occur in the workplace. There is also another dimension involved, in that not only do people have a culture, but organizations do as well.

People's behaviors, without their realizing it, stem from culture and cultural values. The more people know about their own culture, the better they can address the issues that arise.

UNIT 3

HANDOUT

CULTURE



Values



Beliefs



Behaviors

*The more a person understands
the influence of culture
the more effective
communication
can be.*