

CHAPTER FOUR

CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE



Culture comes into its own in human interactions, and one of the greatest arenas for such interaction is the place where people work. In preceding chapters, you considered how culture would affect you on the job. Here, you examine the impact of culture on a variety of work-related norms and behaviors, paying particular attention to three dimensions of cultural difference that have special implications for the workplace:

1. the concept of power and power distance;
2. attitudes toward uncertainty and the unknown; and
3. the concept of status.

The first month or two in class I was always saying, “Look at me when I talk to you,” and the kids simply wouldn’t do it. They would always look at their hands, or the blackboard, or anywhere except looking me in the face. And finally one of the other teachers told me it was a cultural thing. They should warn us about things like that.

—Tony Hillerman
Skinwalkers



4.1—FROM JAN'S JOURNAL

Jan has now been at her site a little over a year. In this excerpt from her journal, she writes about her experiences at the local AIDS clinic where she volunteers one day a week. Her task there is to work with a local health educator and design posters and illustrated pamphlets to use in AIDS education talks at the clinic and in nearby villages. In her interactions with clinic employees, she has run into a number of workplace issues. As you read her journal, mark where you think Jan misunderstood workplace norms, or projected some of her own attitudes and values onto the host culture.

September 21

1. The saga continues at the clinic. I think I understand better how things work around here, but I have to say I'm not happy with my progress, or lack of progress. I've made some very good friends, one or two of whom even confide in me, but I didn't come to this country just to make friends. The problem seems to be a lack of funds to buy the materials I need to get started.

2. Actually, that's not 100 percent true; the money is there, but it's not coming to me. I've asked several times, but everyone says it's up to Mr. Beton, the clinic manager, with whom I've never even had a one-on-one meeting. I did meet him in the beginning, when I first came here, but he was with a lot of other people, so I didn't get to discuss my project. I did meet his boss one afternoon, though, when she was on a tour of the clinic and passed by my office. She asked me how things were going, and I said fine, except I had no money to buy materials. She said she would check into it, but nothing has happened. A few days after that, I asked for a meeting with Mr. Beton, but so far, he hasn't responded.

3. While I'm waiting for some movement, I've stumbled across another job I can do. I noticed one day that the clinic has no sign-in forms to record the number of visitors each day. I know the clinic needs this information because the ministry asks for these numbers every quarter, and the clinic's annual budget allocation is

(continued)

based in part on this information. The clinic used to have a form, someone told me, but ran out of copies several months ago, so the receptionist just keeps track with tick marks on a piece of paper. I asked what the old form looked like and then designed a new one and showed it to the man in charge of volunteers. He said it was nice and took it away for approval. I expect it will show up any day now at the front desk.

4. I guess the lesson in all this is that you have to make your own work, not wait around to be told what to do (like most of the staff here seems to do). Once you start looking for ways you can make yourself useful, there's no end to what you can do. At a staff meeting they invited me to the other day, I explained about the new sign-in form and asked people in other departments to let me know if they had similar things I could do for them. I then mentioned again that since I wasn't getting the money I needed for my primary project, I had plenty of time to work on other things.

5. A funny thing happened at that same meeting. Mr. Beton wasn't there, so his deputy ran the meeting. One item on the agenda was a report on the progress of the addition that's being built on the back of the clinic, to consist of two more examining rooms and two waiting rooms. Ground was broken last month, but nothing—and I mean nothing—has happened since. But in his report, the deputy said we had made great progress on the addition. When I asked him when construction was going to start, he said he didn't know!

6. I try hard to take all this in stride. I know things take longer here, so I'm not ready to throw in the towel or anything, but I do think I've been here long enough now to establish my good faith and credibility.

4.2—CONCEPT OF POWER— HIGH & LOW POWER DISTANCE



In this exercise, you consider the notion of power distance; a manifestation of the attitude of a society toward inequality—how cultures deal with people’s different levels of status and their access to power. It is manifest especially in workplace relations, particularly in the role and relationship of the manager and the subordinate. The following brief descriptions of the two poles of this concept—high and low power distance*—suggest the issues involved:

High Power Distance—

People in these cultures accept that inequalities in power and status are natural or existential. In the same way they accept that some people are smarter than others, people accept that some will have more power and influence than others. Those with power tend to emphasize it, to hold it close and not delegate or share it, and to distinguish themselves as much as possible from those who do not have power. They are, however, expected to accept the responsibilities that go with power, to look after those beneath them. Subordinates are not expected to take initiative and are closely supervised.

Low Power Distance—

People in these cultures see inequalities in power and status as largely artificial; it is not natural, though it may be convenient, that some people have power over others. Those with power, therefore, tend to deemphasize it, to minimize the differences between themselves and subordinates, and to delegate and share power to the extent possible. Subordinates are rewarded for taking initiative and do not like close supervision.

**Based on concepts developed by Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences*, Sage Publications, CA, 1980; and *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, NY, 1997.*

In the underlined space before each of the statements below, put an “H” if you think it reflects an attitude of high power distance, or an “L” if low power distance is more likely:

CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIORS

1. ___ People are less likely to question the boss.
2. ___ Elitism is the norm.
3. ___ Students question teachers.
4. ___ Freedom of thought is encouraged.
5. ___ Those in power have special privileges.
6. ___ The chain of command is mainly for convenience.
7. ___ There are greater wage differences between managers and subordinates.
8. ___ Workers prefer precise instructions from superiors.
9. ___ Interaction between boss and subordinate is more informal.
10. ___ Subordinates and bosses are interdependent.
11. ___ Bosses are independent; subordinates are dependent.
12. ___ Freedom of thought could get you into trouble.
13. ___ It’s okay to question the boss.
14. ___ Less social mobility is the norm.
15. ___ The chain of command is sacred.
16. ___ The pecking order is clearly established.
17. ___ Management style is authoritarian and paternalistic.
18. ___ Management style is consultative and democratic.
19. ___ Interaction between boss and subordinate is formal.

(for suggested answers, see page 244.)

—INSIGHT—

Power must be exercised more openly in some cultures than in others.

4.3—TRUST

“Slowly, through ceaseless struggle and effort, I learned to overcome the day-to-day barriers that had previously seemed like indomitable walls. I became an accepted part of my rural community and mastered Spanish. I learned the simple truism that trust must precede change, and focused on making friends with the hill farmers rather than on counting the number of trees that got planted. And, sure enough, the less I focused on the work, the more work seemed to get done.”

—PCV Guatemala

What lessons did this PCV learn that might be helpful to you in your assignment?

Why does he say that trust must precede change?



4.4—DIALOGUES

Each of the dialogues that appears below contains an example of a cultural misunderstanding. The PCV does not recognize power distinctions in the same way as people in the host country. As you read each dialogue, note in the margin the *difference* in interpretation that you detect.

BOSSSES HAVE THEIR REASONS

- PCV: What did the headmistress decide?
 HCN: She said we should put our plan in motion now.
 PCV: But it's not ready.
 HCN: I know, but she must have her reasons.
 PCV: I don't think she's thought it through.
 HCN: Maybe not, but she's the boss.
 PCV: I'm going to talk to her. I think I can change her mind.

*With the best leaders, when
 the work is done the task is
 accomplished, the people will
 say, we have done this
 ourselves.*

**—Lao Tsu, China,
 700 B.C.**

A SURPRISE FOR THE CHIEF

- PCV: I finally figured out how to solve our storage problems.
 HCN: How?
 PCV: We could clean out that shed by the parking lot. It's full of rotting crates that aren't good anymore.
 HCN: That's a great idea. What did Mr. Plonc say?
 PCV: The chief? I didn't tell him yet. I want to surprise him.

—INSIGHT—

Interaction between manager and subordinate is influenced by culture.

THE GOLDEN SPOON

- HCN: Where do you want to have lunch?
PCV: How about the Golden Spoon?
HCN: Fine.
PCV: I'm going to invite the provincial representative, since he's visiting.
HCN: Mr. Kamini? He won't eat with us. He'll eat with the supervisors.
PCV: He might like to let his hair down with us commoners.

A LESSON

- APCD: Did you talk with your department head?
PCV: Mr. Biswas? I thought about it, but he's hopeless.
APCD: I know. He was given that job as a favor.
PCV: I'm going to go straight to the dean.
APCD: Now there's somebody who gets results.
PCV: Maybe this will teach Biswas a lesson.
APCD: How do you mean?
PCV: If you don't do your job, people will go around you.

[Turn to page 245 for an analysis.]



CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

The PCV: Even as I entered the pastel pink building, I noticed a strange absence of noise, considering it was the first day of school. A few isolated students wearing white school jackets rambled through the dimly lit hallway. I looked out into the school yard and saw piles of old desk fragments, broken bricks, and tree fragments. They must be cleaning the school grounds, I thought.

The classroom where I was to teach was located a short walking distance behind the main building. I hopped on my bicycle and coasted right up to my door. Two students were sitting inside playing cards. I looked at the official enrollment number of 47 and asked earnestly, “Where are the other forty-five students?” The card players faltered a bit and then mumbled, “They’ll come by and by.” “Well, let’s start without them,” I suggested, with a disapproving stare at the cards.

Her Students: It was Tito and Mando who came and told us that a skinny, sickly white woman had jumped off her bicycle, run into our classroom, and tried to teach them English that morning. Tito and Mando weren’t even in our class! They were just sitting there, waiting to use the soccer field, when she rushed in like the rains. They weren’t sure what to say because she looked so strange. Her hair was all falling down, and she wore a dress that looked like an old faded bed covering that one might have bought from a Mauritanian vendor in the used clothing market. We knew no one would be at school yet—most students were still on the farms, finishing the harvest—[but] we decided we would go the next day to see what this new American teacher looked like.

—PCV West Africa

4.5—ATTITUDE TOWARD UNCERTAINTY & THE UNKNOWN— HIGH & LOW UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

As Americans, we think we can pretty much do whatever we set our minds to. In Romania, things operate more [cautiously]. There is a great fear of risk.

—PCV Romania



The second of the three dimensions of culture that particularly affects the workplace is how people respond to the inherent uncertainty of life. This uncertainty creates anxiety in all cultures, with characteristic responses— technology to control uncertainty in the natural world; laws, regulations, and procedures to control the uncertainty in human behavior; and religion to address the question of transcendental uncertainty.

While all societies feel threatened by uncertainty, some feel more threatened by it than others do. Depending on their attitudes, different cultures have devised different norms and systems for dealing with it. The two extremes, called high uncertainty avoidance and low uncertainty avoidance,* are described below:

High Uncertainty Avoidance—

Cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance feel especially anxious about the uncertainty in life and try to limit and control it as much as possible. They have more laws, regulations, policies, and procedures and a greater emphasis on obeying them. They also have a strong tendency toward conformity, hence predictability. People take comfort in structure, systems, and expertise—anything that can blunt or even neutralize the impact of the unexpected. The unknown is frightening.

Low Uncertainty Avoidance—

People in these cultures do not feel quite so threatened nor anxious about uncertainty, and therefore do not have such a strong need to limit or control it. They seek to legislate fewer areas of human interaction and tolerate differences better. They feel boxed in by too much structure or too many systems. They are curious rather than frightened by the unknown and are not uncomfortable leaving things to chance. Life is interesting but not especially daunting.

*Based on concepts developed by Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences*, Sage Publications, CA; 1980 and *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, NY, 1997.

As you read the statements that follow, put an “H” in the underlined space preceding those you think relate to high uncertainty avoidance and an “L” where you think low uncertainty avoidance applies.

CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIORS

1. Punctuality is highly valued.
2. People should keep emotions under control.
3. Different is dangerous.
4. People change jobs with more frequency.
5. People expect more formality in interactions.
6. People more readily accept dissent.
7. Take things one day at a time.
8. People should let their emotions out.
9. The chain of command should never be bypassed.
10. Conflict in organizations is natural, nothing to be afraid of.
11. People believe less in common sense.
12. Conflict in organizations should be eliminated.
13. Differences are curious.
14. People change jobs infrequently.
15. A general sense of anxiety prevails.
16. A general sense of well-being prevails.
17. People accept authority more readily; authority is comforting.
18. People accept authority less readily; authority is limiting.
19. Rules should not be broken.
20. Rules can be broken if it makes sense, for pragmatic reasons.
21. Risks should be avoided.
22. Risks are opportunities.



—INSIGHT—

Attitudes toward the unknown shape many human behaviors.

[Turn to page 246 for suggested answers.]

4.6—DIALOGUES

In the following dialogues, see if you can recognize evidence of high or low uncertainty avoidance; note your findings in the margins.

ABOUT MANUEL

The Yapese concepts of time, work, and plan are radically different from ours. Yapese time means an hour or two later; work is a mixture of performing the task and getting updated on everyone from the coconut wireless; plan is a general discussion of something to be done without the details, the doers, the tasks, or the timeline.

—PCV Micronesia

- PCV: How did your meeting go with Manuel?
 HCN: Not very well. He's still seething about being passed over for that promotion.
 PCV: Has he talked to the chief?
 HCN: The chief knows.
 PCV: But Manuel should get it off his chest if it's bothering him.

IN OVER HIS HEAD

- PCV: I think the consultant from the Ministry of the Environment is in over his head.
 HCN: The expert from the capital?
 PCV: Yeah, him.
 HCN: But he has a Ph.D. and studied in France.
 PCV: He still has no idea about how you change behavior in rural communities. His grazing proposal will never work here.
 HCN: I heard some grumbling, actually. Maybe you're right. What do you think he should do?
 PCV: It's simple, really. He should just admit he's wrong and start over again.

REGULATIONS

- PCV: We're getting nowhere with the textbook project.
- HCN: I know. The teachers are getting frustrated.
- PCV: It's all because of that regulation against using money from other budgets, even if they have a surplus.
- HCN: We're stuck with it, I'm afraid.
- PCV: We could just ignore it and say we didn't know any better.

BACKLOG

- HCN: Did you hear? We won't be getting a new staff person after all.
- PCV: I know. So much for getting rid of our backlog.
- HCN: Well, we can resubmit the request next summer.
- PCV: Actually, I've got a better idea. I've heard about some new accounting software that would make our workload a lot easier.
- HCN: Has it been tried in organizations like ours?
- PCV: In America. I don't know about here. We could probably get it free if we asked.
- HCN: And then train everyone in it?
- PCV: Right.

—INSIGHT—

Your attitudes towards laws, regulations, policies, and procedures and the degree to which people must obey them may not be the same as those in your host country.

[An analysis of these dialogues appears on page 247.]

4.7—NO LEGS

“From the reports on file, it was obvious that we hadn’t accomplished anything at all after ten years of Peace Corps running the community center in Sedhiou. We had a library with no books, a milk program with no milk, and a pre-school with no education taking place. As I looked around the region, other foreign aid programs were no better. There was an agricultural college with no students, no materials, and no instructors—of which the town officials were very proud! There was a Taiwanese agricultural mission to teach advanced farming methods, totally ignored by the farmers.”

—PCV Senegal

Why do you think such projects don’t get off the ground?

How would you approach a community project in order to get a different result?

4.8—THE SOURCE OF STATUS— ACHIEVED OR ASCRIBED

This is the last of the three workplace-related cultural dimensions presented in this chapter: how people come by their status, in their organizations, and in society in general. This concept is related to power distance in some respects and to the individualism/collectivism dichotomy in others. Certain features, however, are outside of those two dimensions and deserve attention in their own right. The two poles here are sometimes referred to as achieved and ascribed, and in other cases, as “doing” cultures and “being” cultures. They are briefly described below.

Achieved Status—

In these *doing* cultures, people are looked up to and respected because of their personal and especially their professional accomplishments. You get ahead into positions of power and influence by virtue of your achievements and performance. Your status is earned and not merely a function of birth, age, or seniority. You are hired based on your record of success, not on the basis of family background, connections, or the school you attended. People aren't particularly impressed with titles. Education is important, but not the mere fact of it; you have to have done something with your knowledge. Status is not automatic and can be forfeited if you stop achieving.



Ascribed Status—

In these *being* cultures, a certain amount of status is built into the person; it is automatic and therefore difficult to lose. You are looked up to because of the family and social class you are born into, because of your affiliations and membership in certain important groups, and, later, because of your age and seniority. The school you went to and the amount of education you received also confer status, whether or not you did well in school or have done anything with your education. Titles are important and should always be used. You are pressured to justify the power, respect and deference that you automatically enjoy. While you cannot lose your status completely, you can lose respect by not realizing your potential.

The following incidents have come about in part because of cultural differences involving status; in the space below each description, write what you would do in the particular situation.

UPSTANDING STUDENTS

You are a high school teacher in your country. When you enter the classroom, all your students automatically stand up until you give them the signal to sit. You are uncomfortable with this deferential behavior and tell your students they need not stand when you enter the room. After two weeks, the headmaster asks to speak with you. He informs you that the other teachers have heard that your students don't stand when you enter the room and the teachers are upset. They regard this behavior as a sign of disrespect, which they fear may spread to their classrooms. They worry, moreover, that you deliberately may be trying to blur the distinction between teacher and student. If students put themselves on the same level as teachers, chaos will result. What should you do about the teachers' reactions?

RESPECT

You are an urban planner working for the city government. Every morning a truck bearing city sanitation laborers stops at your house to give you a ride to work. Your boss, an engineer, and a second professional always sit up front in the cab, but you like to sit in the back and banter with the laborers. After a few days, your boss says you are confusing the workers with your informal behavior and warns you that you will soon lose their respect if you don't start acting like a professional. How do you respond?

How can she understand our culture? She has only seen the rains fall once.

—HCN Guineau-Bissau

IN THE MATTER OF MR. KODO

You're being asked to take sides in a faculty dispute. A few weeks ago a vacancy occurred in the department of the university where you teach. The two candidates for the position, both college graduates, were an older man (Mr. Kodo) who has been at this school for 15 years and a younger man with more up-to-date technical credentials, a superior educational background, and two years of experience on this faculty. From a technical standpoint, the younger man was a much stronger candidate and also a more dynamic teacher, and he was in fact selected for the position by the British expatriate who chairs this department.

Mr. Kodo and many of his (and your) colleagues were stunned by the decision, seeing it as a repudiation of his years of experience and dedication to this institution. Mr. Kodo is extremely embarrassed at being passed over and has not appeared on campus since the announcement was made. Now his colleagues are circulating a petition to the chairman to reconsider his decision and put Mr. Kodo into the job he deserves. They have asked you to sign the petition, already signed by all of them as well as scores of students, and to participate actively in this campaign. You in fact feel the right choice was made and are reluctant to get involved, but you are under increasing pressure to "do the right thing." What do you do?

CONSIDERING THE SOURCE

You are the technical expert at a provincial agricultural extension office. A delegation from the Minister’s office is coming next week to discuss an important change in policy. You are the person who can make the most substantive contribution to this discussion, but you are not being invited to the meeting. Instead, your boss has been picking your brain for days and has asked you to write a report for him containing all the important points he should make. Finally, you ask him why he doesn’t just bring you along to the meeting and let you speak directly to the delegation. He says you’re too young to be taken seriously, and besides, you’re a woman. Your arguments are too important, he says, and he doesn’t want them to be discounted because of their source. How do you feel, and what’s your response?

[For suggested ideas, turn to page 248.]



4.9—WORKPLACE VALUES AND NORMS—COMPARING AMERICAN AND HOST COUNTRY VIEWS

In this exercise, you compare the American and host country positions on key dimensions of culture that affect the workplace, including those discussed in this chapter—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and source of status—as well as several others. Once again, as in Chapter Three, the mechanism used here is a continuum on which you indicate (with the letters H.C. and U.S.) where you think the cultures of your host country and the United States fit.

WORKPLACE VALUES AND NORMS—CONTINUUM

Power Distance

Low Power Distance

High Power Distance

<p>←—————→</p> <p>Less distance, more interaction exists between the boss and subordinates. The boss is more democratic, delegates responsibility. Taking initiative is okay. It's also okay to disagree with or question the boss. The boss sees himself/herself as one of the group. Power is decentralized.</p>	<p>→—————←</p> <p>Greater distance exists between the boss and subordinates. Power is centralized and generally not shared. The boss does not delegate responsibility or reward initiative. The worker does not disagree with or question the boss. The boss sees himself/herself as on one level, workers on another. The boss is more autocratic and paternalistic.</p>
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Uncertainty Avoidance

Low Uncertainty Avoidance

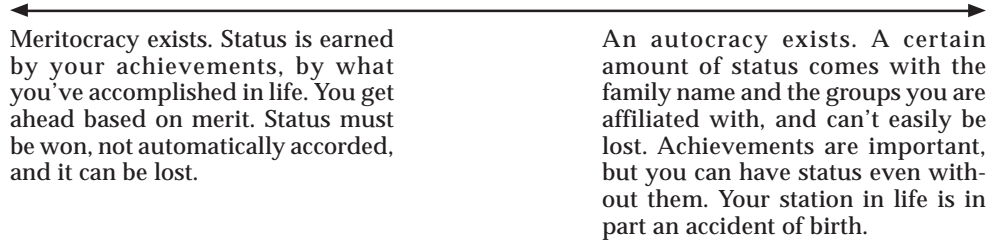
High Uncertainty Avoidance

<p>←—————→</p> <p>The unknown need not be scary. Fewer laws exist and less emphasis is on conformity. It's okay to break laws for pragmatic reasons; it's okay to bypass the chain of command if necessary. Conflict can't always be avoided. Taking risks is acceptable. Interactions are more informal. Different is interesting.</p>	<p>→—————←</p> <p>The unknown must be controlled. More laws exist and greater emphasis is on obeying laws and conforming. It's never good to break laws or bypass the chain of command, whatever the reason. Conflict must be avoided; risks are not attractive. Interactions are more formal. Different is dangerous.</p>
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Source of Status

Achieved Status

Ascribed Status



Concept of Work

Work As Part Of Identity

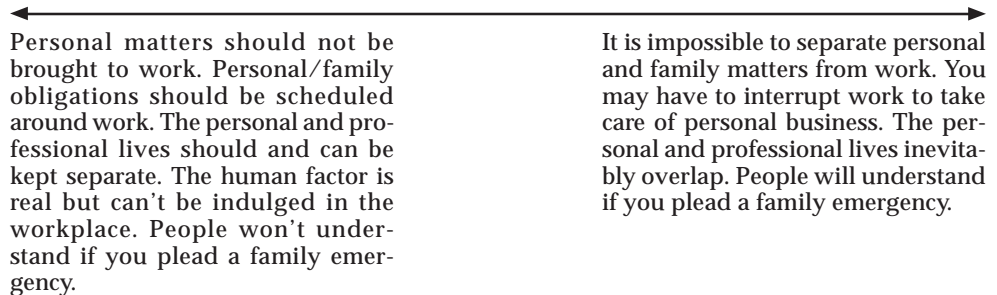
Work As Functional Necessity



Personal & Professional

Personal/Professional Separated

Personal/Professional Intertwined



Motivation

Professional Opportunity

Comfortable Work Environment



Professional opportunity and success are important motivating factors. People want to learn, get ahead, move up in their professions or organizations and have greater power, authority and responsibility. Job security is not so important as the chance to make more money and advance in one's career.

People are motivated by the desire to have a pleasant work setting and good relationships with coworkers. Job security is important, as is an organization that takes care of its employees. Having more time off to spend with family is also very motivating. More power and responsibility are not of themselves attractive, even if they mean more money.

—INSIGHT—
Americans and host country nationals may have different views of certain fundamental work-related topics.

The Key to Productivity

Results

Harmony



Focusing on the task insures success. People won't always get along, but you have to move forward anyway. Harmony is nice but results are what count. If you get results, people will be more harmonious. Getting results is ultimately more important than how you get them.

Working well with other people is the key to success in any enterprise. Harmony in the workplace will insure eventual success. Getting things done hinges on people getting along well. Results bought at the expense of harmony are too costly. How you get results is just as important as the results themselves.

The Ideal Worker

Technical Skills

People Skills



What matters most in a worker is his/her technical qualifications: education, work experience, and specific skills. "People" skills are important, but they don't contribute as much to the bottom line. Hiring a relative would be sheer coincidence and only if he/she had the skills you needed. Demonstrated competence is the key to getting promoted.

What matters most in a worker is his/her ability to work well with others and not rock the boat. Experience and technical skills are important, but they don't contribute as much to the bottom line. Hiring a relative is always a good bet. Age and seniority are important for getting promoted.

CONTINUUM NOTES

If any two or three continuums show the host country and American positions at opposite ends, then indicate in the space provided how you think host country nationals perceive Americans in this respect:

Continuum: _____

How HCNs perceive Americans:

Continuum: _____

How HCNs perceive Americans:

Continuum: _____

How HCNs perceive Americans:

[For possible perceptions, see page 249.]

Observation Activity



4.10—OBSERVING THE WORKPLACE

To complete this activity, you need to find someone working in the host country who will let you accompany him or her to the workplace for a day or a few hours for several days. Try to go on a day when a meeting is going on that you could attend. The person with you may be able to translate important exchanges for you if you aren't familiar enough with the local language, but even if there is no one to translate you can learn much about what's happening from your observations.

Your task is simply to watch and listen to what is going on around you and record what you see. Below are a list of questions to prompt or guide your observations. You don't need to answer these questions or use this list if you are more comfortable carrying out your observations in some other fashion. What is important is to take note of the differences between what you see here and what you would expect to see happening in a comparable workplace in the United States.

OBSERVATIONS

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

- ◇ How do people dress?
- ◇ How do they greet each other in the morning?
- ◇ What is the protocol for going in and out of someone's office?
- ◇ Do people maintain eye contact when they talk?
- ◇ How far apart do people stand?

MONO/POLYCHRONIC BEHAVIORS

- ◇ Do people come to work on time? Who does and who doesn't?
- ◇ What happens when someone who is talking to someone else gets a telephone call?
- ◇ What does a third person do when approaching two others who are already in conversation?



What did I know? I wasn't sure. And then it came to me: I knew how to get along with people. I knew how to bring people together. No, I didn't know a great deal about gardening or almost anything technical, but I was sure I could bring together those who did with those who wanted to learn.

—PCV Chile

- ◇ Do meetings start on time?
- ◇ How long do people with appointments have to wait?

POWER DISTANCE BEHAVIORS

- ◇ How do subordinates treat their superiors?
- ◇ How do superiors treat subordinates?
- ◇ Do you see evidence of bosses delegating authority or holding on to it?
- ◇ Do you see evidence of subordinates taking initiative, or just waiting for instruction?
- ◇ Whom do people eat lunch with? Do they eat only with their peers, or is there mixing of the ranks?

COMMUNICATION STYLES

- ◇ How is conflict handled?
- ◇ How is disagreement expressed?
- ◇ How is bad news or a negative concern communicated?
- ◇ How important does saving face seem to be?
- ◇ Are people generally direct or indirect in their conversation?
- ◇ Does this appear to be a high or low context workplace?

OTHER WORKPLACE NORMS

- ◇ When people interact, do they get to the task right away or talk more generally?
- ◇ Do people work closely together or more independently?
- ◇ Are women treated differently from men? If so, in what way?
- ◇ What kind of behaviors in workers seem to be rewarded? What are people praised for?
- ◇ What does the prevailing attitude seem to be about rules and procedures and the need to follow them?

What major differences do you see between this workplace and one where you've worked in the United States?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____



4.11—YOU AMERICANS

Another issue you face in the workplace is dealing with some of the impressions your colleagues and counterparts have of Americans. Whether or not you actually contribute to these notions by your own behavior and whether or not you think they are fair or accurate, you can expect to run up against them. Below each of the eight common observations that follow, write a brief comment about why you think host country people might feel this way:

1. Why are you Americans always in such a hurry to get things done?
2. Why do you Americans insist on treating everyone the same?
3. Why do you Americans always have to say what you're thinking?
4. Why do you Americans always want to change things?
5. Why don't you Americans show more respect for your seniors and elders?
6. Why do you Americans always think things are going to get better?
7. Why are you Americans so concerned about individual recognition?
8. Why are you Americans so impatient?

[For comments, see page 249.]

Now select three of the statements on the previous page that struck you, for whatever reason, and answer the two questions given below:

1. Statement _____

How would you feel if this statement were made about you?

How would you respond if someone said it to you?

2. Statement _____

How would you feel if this statement were made about you?

How would you respond if someone said it to you?

3. Statement _____

How would you feel if this statement were made about you?

How would you respond if someone said it to you?

4.12—PACING

“What about the ‘work?’ You’ll notice I put that word in quotation marks, not because you won’t work very hard here. It’s just that you won’t understand why it’s so hard. In the States, hard work is 60 hours a week. Here it’s waiting for things to happen, watching them happen at a pace that’s absurdly slow by the standards you’re used to, and then trying to work the way the people work here. Otherwise you won’t be working with them; you’ll be working for them.”

—PCV Madagascar

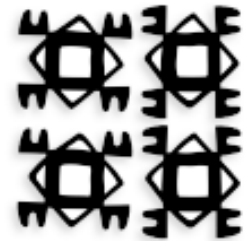
How good are you at waiting for things to happen?

How will you handle the slow pace at which things sometimes proceed in country?

4.13—TURNING THE TABLES

PART ONE

To be effective working in another culture, it is useful to understand how you are being seen by your colleagues and counterparts. In the first part of this activity, you are asked to imagine that the tables are turned, that you are in the position of HCNs who are about to have a PCV join them in the workplace. To help put you in their place, imagine that you work in a typical American office, with ten or so coworkers, a supervisor, and an office head to whom the supervisor reports. All of you have worked together for at least a year and know each other and your respective jobs quite well. Now imagine that one day a person from another country shows up and begins working with you, someone who:



1. doesn't understand English very well, and speaks broken English that you can't always understand;
2. doesn't understand American culture or customs and is always making embarrassing mistakes;
3. doesn't understand his/her job very well and is not especially competent, at least in the beginning;
4. doesn't understand how things work around here; and
5. frequently behaves in ways that are insensitive, frustrating, or just plain rude.

How would you react to having such a person suddenly working in your office? Answer the following questions quickly and honestly:

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. I would often find it frustrating. | Yes | No |
| 2. I would wonder why this person was sent to work here. | Yes | No |
| 3. I would not trust this person with anything important to do. | Yes | No |
| 4. I would assume this person didn't understand our system very well. | Yes | No |
| 5. I would imagine that working with this person would be more difficult than working with my other coworkers. | Yes | No |

Be sure you have what you need for your home and job, and then keep your mouth shut and watch carefully for a few months. If you don't fit in, you'll be ineffective.

—PCV Fiji

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| 6. I would be irritated at some of this person's behavior. | Yes | No |
| 7. I would think this person was insensitive. | Yes | No |
| 8. I would think this person had bad manners. | Yes | No |
| 9. I would find some of this person's behaviors very strange. | Yes | No |
| 10. I could never be sure what this person was thinking. | Yes | No |
| 11. I could never be sure how this person would react to something I might do or say. | Yes | No |
| 12. I would worry that this person could embarrass us. | Yes | No |
| 13. I would feel sorry for this person. | Yes | No |
| 14. I would find talking to this person frustrating and want to end the conversation as soon as possible. | Yes | No |
| 15. I would occasionally be hurt, insulted or frustrated by this person's behavior. | Yes | No |

PART TWO

In the beginning of your tour, you will have to spend some time establishing your credibility. In thinking how you might do this try to recall other times when you were in a situation where you were an unknown or untested entity and had to prove yourself to others. What did you do?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

[For suggestions from other PCVs, see page 250.]

As the following statements indicate, however, some factors are working in *your favor*, and you may think of others to add to this list:

1. People assume that you wouldn't have come here if you thought you were going to be wasting your time. They can accept that *you* at least believe you have something to offer, which may make them think twice about you.
2. It may be known that whatever else you may lack, you do have the technical expertise to be here doing this job. You may never have done the work in this context before, but you do know your stuff.
3. The United States is seen as an advanced country in many respects, so Americans are often viewed as people who may have knowledge or experience that host country people do not have.
4. You are probably not the first PCV at this site. If your predecessors were even partial successes, then people realize that a PCV eventually can get things done.

5. _____

6. _____

—INSIGHT—

It may take some time before host country people start to give you the benefit of the doubt.



FROM JAN'S JOURNAL—AN ANALYSIS

Now that you've finished this chapter, reread the excerpt from Jan's journal and note any additional observations/behaviors you now think are suspect; then read the analysis below.

Jan has experienced a number of the classic frustrations PCVs often encounter as they go about their work. Even so, she is probably being a little too hard on herself, as she seems to realize by the last paragraph.

Paragraph 1—

She laments her lack of progress, and then in the next breath says that a few people at the clinic do confide in her. She should be cheered by this fact, for it means she has made enough of a positive impression that certain people are sharing some of their innermost thoughts with her. Under the circumstances—she only goes there once a week, remember—this is progress.

Paragraph 2—

When she says she didn't talk to Mr. Beton when she first met him because "he was with a lot of other people," she is speaking like someone from a monochronic culture. If hers is a polychronic culture, she could probably have spoken to him in front of those other people (though not to complain or berate him) and not caused any problem. Indeed, she might never get a private audience with him, unless it is for something especially important.

When Mr. Beton's boss toured the clinic, Jan told her she wasn't getting any money for her work. This statement was ill advised, for several reasons. First of all, you don't normally tell big bosses your problems; you tell them what you think they want to hear and tell your immediate boss your problems. Worse, by going over Mr. Beton's head and complaining to *his* boss, Jan has committed a cardinal sin in high power distance/high uncertainty avoidance cultures: going around the chain of command. When Mr. Beton finds out, he will probably be quite upset, which may be why Jan hasn't gotten the meeting she requested yet.

Paragraph 3—

Designing a new sign-in form without being asked or without asking for permission—taking some initiative is what Jan would probably call it—is probably not a good idea in high power distance cultures. Bosses like to make decisions and don't like it

when subordinates seize authority; in this case, Jan isn't even a subordinate but a volunteer. What's worse here is that this sign-in form may have been left to languish for a good reason: If money is based on clinic usage, then more tick marks (which is in the control of the secretary) means more money and is rather easy to arrange. But sign-in forms are less accommodating. Jan may wait a long time before her sign-in form ever shows up at the front desk.

Paragraph 4—

Jan says you can't just "wait around to be told what to do," like her colleagues. But in high power distance cultures, this behavior is the norm. Doing things without being told is usurping authority. She then says that at the staff meeting she mentioned she wasn't getting her money, so she had nothing to do. This statement might have been embarrassing to the man who handles volunteers or even to Mr. Beton, who will now look bad because Jan's project is going nowhere.

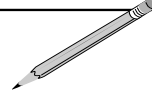
Paragraph 5—

She probably also embarrassed the deputy by asking in front of others when construction on the clinic was going to start. That it has not started could be perceived as a failing of the boss, and to have that failing brought out into the open could cause a loss of face. Another interpretation of this exchange might be that in the deputy's mind, to get to the point of breaking ground was a great achievement, representing considerable progress, and the fact that construction hasn't actually started yet is a minor detail. The hard work has been done.

*To leave the world a bit better,
whether by a healthy child, a
garden patch or a redeemed
social condition, to know even
one life has breathed easier
because you have lived—this is
to have succeeded.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

JOURNAL ENTRY 4



From what you have heard, what do you expect will be hardest about your job in the Peace Corps? How are you going to approach this difficulty? Has any of your previous experience prepared you for this problem?

FUNDAMENTALS OF CULTURE IV

THE LOCUS OF CONTROL

This exercise introduces the fourth and last of the four fundamentals of culture: the locus of control. The two poles of this dimension, activism and fatalism, are defined and explored in the activity that immediately follows this one.

IV.1—WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

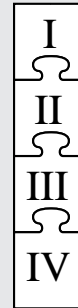
Which of the following two statements do you most agree with?
Circle one.

- A. What happens to me is my own doing.
- B. Sometimes I feel I don't have control over the direction my life is taking.

Percentage of Americans who chose A = 89%

Percentage of Chinese who chose A = 35%

What do you think accounts for the difference between American and Chinese percentages?



—INSIGHT—

People from different cultures may see their ability to influence external events very differently.

[After writing your answer, turn to page 251 for a brief discussion.]

IV.2—THE LOCUS OF CONTROL— INTERNAL & EXTERNAL

Cultures differ greatly in their view of a person's place in the external world, especially the degree to which human beings can control or manipulate forces outside themselves and thereby shape their own destiny. The two sides of this dimension, internal and external control,* are described below:

Internal —

The locus of control is largely internal, within the individual. There are very few givens in life, few circumstances that have to be accepted as they are, that cannot be changed. There are no limits on what I can do or become, so long as I set my mind to it and make the necessary effort. Life is what I *do*.

External —

The locus of control is largely external to the individual. Some aspects of life are predetermined, built into the nature of things. There are limits beyond which we cannot go and certain givens that cannot be changed and must be accepted. Life is in large part what *happens to me*.

In the following sets of statements, circle the statement that does not belong, either because it is characteristic of internal control and all the rest are external control, or vice versa.

1. Stoicism is the rule.
2. The laws of the universe can be discovered.
3. Progress is inevitable.
4. Every problem has a solution.

1. Optimism is the rule.
2. Some things are a matter of luck or chance.
3. Where there's a will there's a way.
4. People believe strongly in technology.

*Based on concepts developed by F. Kluckhohn and F.S. Strodtbeck, *Variations in value orientations*, NY, Harper & Row, 1961.

1. Unhappiness is your own fault.
2. Progress is not automatic.
3. The workings of the universe are ultimately unknowable.
4. Nature cannot be dominated.

1. You make your own luck.
2. Some problems do not have solutions.
3. Where there's a will there's a will.
4. Unhappiness is a natural part of life.

(For suggested answers, see page 251.)

—INSIGHT—

Culture influences how much control people believe they have over their lives.



WHERE THERE'S A WILL

“To není možná/It isn’t possible” is one of the first phrases I learned in the Czech language, and a lot of my ideas were met with this response.

—PCV Czech Republic

The scene is a cafe in Tangiers. Tomorrow is Saturday. I’ve just invited a Moroccan friend to a picnic at the beach. Will he come? “Perhaps,” he says in English, translating from the Arabic, *N’Shallah*, which literally means if God is willing. I’m feeling hurt. What does he mean, perhaps? Either he wants to come or he doesn’t. It’s up to him. If he doesn’t want to come, he only has to say so. He doesn’t understand why I seem upset, and I don’t quite grasp, “Perhaps.” Our two cultures confront each other across the tea cups.

Only several years later, reading a book about culture, did I understand. He would come, he meant, if Allah willed it. His *wanting* to come and his being permitted to come were not one and the same. In Morocco, unlike America, where there’s a will there is not necessarily a way. So who was I to demand an answer to my question? And who was he to give one?

It was an exciting moment. I had stumbled upon a parallel universe, one founded upon a different auxiliary verb, on *may* rather than *will*. Where there was one such universe, might there not be others?

—PCV Morocco

IV.3—SCORE YOURSELF— INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONTROL

Below are a number of paired statements (a. and b.). Immediately after reading each pair, circle which of the two best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1a. If I'm unhappy, I should do something about it. | 1b. Nothing's broken if I'm unhappy; it's just part of life's ups and downs. |
| 2a. The external world is a mechanism like other mechanisms; its workings can be discovered, predicted, even manipulated. | 2b. The external world is complex, dynamic and organic. It cannot ultimately be known. |
| 3a. You should see life as it really is. | 3b. It is important to have a positive attitude about life. |
| 4a. If I try hard enough and want something bad enough, nothing can stop me from getting what I want. | 4b. Some things are beyond my reach, no matter what I do. |
| 5a. What is new is suspect. | 5b. What is new is usually better. |
| 6a. I make my own luck. | 6b. Many things happen because of chance or luck. |
| 7a. Every problem has a solution, if you look hard enough. | 7b. Some problems don't have a solution. |
| 8a. I tend to be a stoic. | 8b. I tend to be proactive and a doer. |
| 9a. If a friend is depressed, I would try to cheer him/her up. | 9b. If a friend is depressed, there is no need for me to do anything. |

—INSIGHT—

Activists and fatalists live in very different worlds.

After making your selections, turn to page 252 for results, and then calculate whether you came out more on the internal or external side. Is your score here consistent with your self-concept?

IV.4

IV.4—DOING

Americans are notorious for being doers, activists. One of the most common complaints of PCVs around the world is how long it takes to “get things done” in the host country. Sometimes the complaint appears in comments about the slow pace of life overseas. This American urge to do something, however, is somewhat inconsistent with the Peace Corps mandate to help *other people* do something. In your Peace Corps assignment, how do you think you’ll be able to deal with this situation, to reconcile the activist side of your character? Will you have to redefine your notion of accomplishment or of success? Write your comments in the space below:

