



## How to Understand the Culture of Your Client's Organization

### Basic Guidelines to Culturally-Specific Consulting

- 1. Be aware of your personal biases, style and preferences.**  
For example, do you favor a fast-paced style that focuses primarily on getting results, or a slow-paced style that focuses primarily on getting along with others? How will your own biases affect what you see and value in the client's organization during a project?
- 2. Realize that each part of an organization probably has a unique culture.**  
It's not uncommon that the nature of people in one program is quite different from that of another program. For example, administrative people often value focus on details and procedures, while program people might favor interpersonal skills and serving others.
- 3. Convey to your client that you want to be sensitive to their culture.**  
It's OK to mention this to the client early in the project that you recognize the value of understanding culture and that you'd appreciate help in understanding their unique organization. Most people don't expect you to know everything about everybody and every culture.
- 4. Ask for help to help you understand effects of culture during the project.**  
Many times, your primary contact in the organization will be glad to assist you. However, people often do not understand the culture of their own organizations, any more than a fish understands the nature of water. Therefore, review the following list of key aspects with them.

### Cultural Aspects to Learn About Your Client's Organization

Consider asking your client to help you understand how each of the following questions would be answered about the client's organization or group, especially as would be effected in a project for change:

- 1. Assertiveness**  
Are members of your client's organization comfortable being honest and direct with each other? If not, how can you still be as authentic as possible and help them to be as authentic as possible, as well?
- 2. Body language**  
Are there any specific cues that you can notice to help you to sense how others are experiencing you?

3. **Communication styles and direction**  
Is communication fairly direct and specific or more indirect and general? Does information flow mostly “upward” to executives or is it widely disseminated?
4. **Conflict**  
Is conflict considered to be bad and avoided? Or is conflict accepted as normal and directly addressed when it appears?
5. **Eye contact**  
Are members of the organization comfortable with sustained eye contact during communication or not?
6. **Gestures**  
Are there any specific gestures that can cause members of the organization discomfort or confusion?
7. **Humor**  
Is use of humor in the organization rather widespread? Is there anything about the use of humor about which you should be aware?
8. **Information collection**  
Should you be aware of any potential problems or use any certain precautions when conducting interviews or using assessments?
9. **Physical space**  
For example, are members of your client’s organization quite conscious of having a minimum amount of space around them when they work or speak with others?
10. **Power**  
Are members attuned to certain people of power when solving problems and making decisions? Is power based on authority and/or respect?
11. **Silence**  
Are members uncomfortable with silence during communication? Or is it a common aspect of communicating in their workplace?
12. **Time**  
Is time a precious commodity that seems to underlie many activities, or can activities take as long as they need to take to be done effectively?
13. **Wording**  
Are there certain words or phrasings that cause discomfort when people from different cultures interact?