Understanding Cultural Differences

CE 105 Civil Engineering Projects
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November 18, 2009
Background

Ph.D.  Clemson  1995  Environmental Systems Engineering
M.S.  Georgia Tech  1988  Environmental Engineering
B.S.  Drexel  1984  Civil Engineering

1984 - 1987  Engineer in Operations.  City of Baltimore, Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, Baltimore, Maryland
Why understanding cultural differences is important

- You *will* work with people from other cultures (probably starting in this class)
- You *will* have the opportunity to travel
- The “world is flat”
Hot vs. Cold Climate
(from Lanier text)

Hot climate cultures are
- relationship based
- Communication must create a “feel good” atmosphere
- Society is feeling oriented
- Efficiency and time do not take priority over the person
- Inappropriate to talk business upon first arriving at a meeting or on the phone
Cold climate cultures

- Task oriented
- Communication must provide accurate information
- Society is logic oriented
- Efficiency and time are high priorities and taking them seriously shows respect for the other person
Direct Communication

- Short direct questions show respect and professionalism
- “Yes” is yes and “no” is no
- An honest direct answer is information only (does not reflect on how the person feels about you)
- You can say what you think and it will not be taken personally
Indirect Communication

- All about being friendly
- Every question must be phrased in such a way as to not offend
- Use third party for accurate information
- Yes may not be an answer to your question
- Avoid embarrassing people
Individualistic Culture

- I am a self-standing person with my own identity
- Every individual should have an opinion and can speak for him or herself
- Taking initiative within a group is good and expected
- One must know how to make one’s own decisions
- My behavior reflects on me and not on the group
Group Oriented Culture

- My identity is tied to the group (family, tribe, etc.)
- My group protects and provides for me
- Taking initiative within a group can be greatly determined by my role
- I do not expect to have to stand alone
- My behavior reflects on the whole group
- Team members expect direction from the leader
Inclusion Cultures

- Group oriented
- Individuals are automatically included in conversation, meals, and other activities of the group
- Possessions are to be freely used by all: food, tools, etc.
- Not desirable to be left to oneself
- Rude to hold a private conversation or make plans that exclude others present
Privacy Culture

- Enjoy having time and space to themselves
- People are expected to ask permission to borrow something or interrupt a conversation
- Each person is considered to be the steward of his or her possessions
- In a community setting, it might be common to label one’s food tools, etc. to set them apart from the groups common possessions
- It is acceptable to hold private conversations or make exclusive plans
Hospitality – Hot Climate

- Spontaneous often without advance invitation
- Context for relationship
- Usually in the home
- Host takes care of the needs of the guest.
  Guest pays for nothing
- Gift is usually expected
- Food and drink involved
- Travelers are taken in and provided for
Hospitality – Cold Climate

- Taken very seriously and planned for
- Not spontaneous – advance notice is expected
- Travelers are expected to make their own arrangements other than what is specifically communicated to the host ahead of time
- Guests need to expect to pay for their transportation and restaurants if visiting the US. If the host plans to pay he will usually say so.
- Hospitality is a special occasion taking the full attention of the host
High Context

- “Who you are related to” matters
- “Who you know” matters
- Better to overdress than under dress
- Watch to see how others respond to a situation in order to apply appropriate behavior
- Honor the people you are dealing with
- Ask a local person who has lived overseas what is important to know
- Use manners, respect rules, give attention to appropriate greetings
Low Context

- Who you know is important, but what you know is more important
- Don’t be offended by casual atmosphere
- Lack of protocol does not mean rejecting, nor is it dishonoring
- Leave your rules at home
- Address people by their given names unless others use titles
Time and Planning – Hot Climate

- Hot Climate
  - Not oriented around the clock
  - Event oriented
  - Spontaneous and flexible
  - Respond to what life brings
  - Saving time is not as important as experiencing the moment
  - Recognize that structure is required in some areas of life (e.g., military)
  - Informal visits are part of the event
Time and Planning – Cold Climate

Cold Climate

– time oriented
– Structured approach to life
– Enjoy using time efficiently
– Plan their day
– Expecting the event to begin on time
– Visiting or informal chatting happens before or after the event
Practical Next Steps

- Look for a culture interpreter
- Read up on history
- Find a bookstore in host country to see what other foreigners have found valuable
- Before leaving home, find other people from that country who can talk about their home
- Try to find out about what values are important to the people
Practical Next Steps

- Be aware of culture shock and culture stress
- On returning home be aware of reverse culture shock
- Look for others who have travelled to share your experiences with (those who haven’t travelled may not care)
- Learn phrases in the local language or dialect (even a small attempt shows that you value their culture)
- Go to listen and observe, don’t pass judgment until you know the reason behind their customs