

People, Partnerships, and Communities

*The purpose of the
People, Partnerships, and
Communities series is to
assist The Conservation
Partnership to build
capacity by transferring
information about social
science related topics*

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Working With People of Different Cultures

Why is Understanding Cultural Difference Important?

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, with offices across the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, and many US territories, is constantly working with people of different cultures. While much of working successfully with people of different cultures is best learned “on the job”, there are some concepts and methods that have been shown to ease cross-cultural communications. Using such proven concepts and methods to work with people of other cultures will improve NRCS service delivery and build better relations with our expanding customer base.

American society is changing rapidly. We are witnessing a growing number of different ethnic and racial groups in America. This increase affects agriculture and NRCS in two primary ways: (1) there is an increase in the number of producers who belong to different cultural groups¹ and (2) the NRCS workforce is growing more culturally diverse².

What is “Culture”?

“Culture” is a term that is widely used, and misused, in America today. Newspapers, magazines, television, and the Internet all abound with discussions of different “cultures.” Many things are called cultures that are really just small parts of everyday life, or the most recent focus of media attention. Culture provides an interpretive framework that affects all decisions that people make, all the time. When viewed from this perspective, it is obvious that the “fashion culture,” or the “youth culture” are simply media tags for short-lived social phenomena. It is unlikely that many parents teach their children about the importance of a “corporate culture.”

Culture, for the purposes of this discussion, may be defined as: “A complex, learned, shared, system of human behavior. Culture is taken for granted by its users, and participants in a culture assume that the codes, habits, customs, and understandings of their particular culture are “normal,” relative to the behavior of members of other cultures.”

Culture is learned, and may be thought of as something that is passed from one generation to the next. Stop for a moment and remember your childhood; think of instances in which you learned the “correct” way to behave, either formally, such as in Sunday school, or informally, such as when you were teased by friends for being “different.” Think of the ways each type of learning influenced your behavior. These learned behaviors are all part of your culture, and determine many of the ways you relate to other people today. At the time you learned these “correct” behaviors, you probably didn’t consciously question their “correctness” too much, and soon learned to assume that what you learned was “right,” and that other kinds of behavior were “strange” or “wrong.”

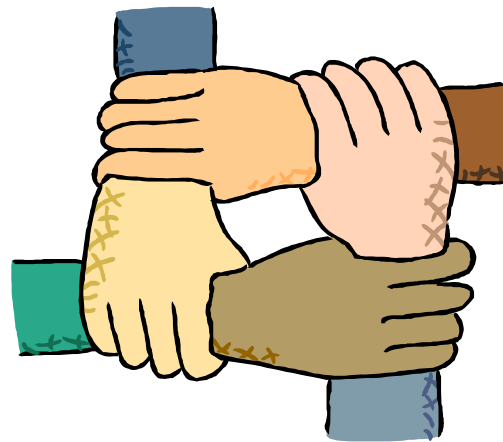
¹ www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/customdata/default.asp

² www.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/FWP/diversirty.html

(What is “Culture” con’t)

Everyone is a member of a culture. A person cannot simply cease being a member of the culture in which they were raised. All of the complex, basic, ideas of daily life, including conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, correct and incorrect, were instilled in each of us as a child and most of these conceptions are reinforced on a daily basis. Just as it is impossible to simply cease being a member of a particular culture, it is equally impossible to simply “know” how members of other cultures will react to your actions.

All of us tend to base our interactions with other people on what our culture tells us is “correct” behavior. One of the most fascinating things about cultural differences is the incredibly wide variety of “correct” responses to any given situation. A person can usually learn what members of another culture consider good or correct by careful observation, thoughtful behavior, and what most Americans consider “tact,” or considerate, unassuming, interaction.



How Do You Work with People of Other Cultures?

Perhaps the most fundamental thing to remember when working with people of other cultures is that there is no “right” or “superior” culture. Your own culture is no more and no less than a way of interpreting the world. Every person’s culture is valid, and no culture is “better” than another. Remember, value judgments are a direct result of what you learn is “good or bad,” within the context of your culture. However, some social scientists feel that “extreme” elements of some cultures can be detrimental to the survival of the species and to basic human survival.

There are no specific methods of working across cultural lines that will apply in all situations with all people. There are, however, some general concepts and approaches that have been shown to be useful. Some of these are:

- **Look for “Common Ground”**

While all cultures are basically different ways of viewing the world, there are usually common interests that may serve as starting points for discussion. Although a new client may be a member of another culture, that person may have an interest in natural resource management. Their ideas about what constitutes “good” management may differ from yours, at least initially, but this common interest is a good point at which to start discussions and the mutual learning process. In some instances, “common ground” may be difficult to find, particularly if someone’s cultural background is very different from your own. In these instances, do your best to make sure the other person understands your perspective. This may very well include discussing things that may not be a normal part of day-to-day operations, such as private property rights and cash economies.

When Should This Information be Used?

Cultural differences should always be kept in mind when working with people who appear to think or behave differently than you do. What may appear to be “odd” or “wrong” to you may simply be a cultural difference. Keep in mind that your behavior may appear to be just as “wrong” to members of another culture. There is rarely any way to usefully define what is “right” and “wrong” when working with people of a different culture. The basic assumptions all people have of what is correct and incorrect are learned, and as such, vary widely between cultures. To attempt to “correct” the behavior of members of another culture based on your own assumptions is almost always seen as rude and overbearing.

Who Should Use This Information?

Any NRCS employee who works with people of other cultures should find this information useful. Additionally, partner organizations may find this information useful when establishing or expanding relations with other cultural or ethnic groups.

- ***Become More Self-Aware***

Your culture provides you with a “framework” that you use every day to determine very basic parts of your behavior. What you learned as part of your culture when you were growing up determines what is “wrong” or “different,” or “bad.” These culturally determined assessments of value are often made unconsciously. The next time you are working with someone from a different culture, try to “step back” and examine your own behavior. Are you making value judgments of the other person’s behaviors or attitudes? Try and remember that the other person’s behavior may be perfectly acceptable by his or her own cultural standards, but “bad,” “wrong,” “incorrect,” or “offensive” to yours (and vice versa).

Working successfully with people of other cultures requires learning from all people involved in a situation. You must be willing to examine some basic ideas and explain them. You must also be open to new ideas and interpretations. People of other cultures will probably view things differently than you do, and may have different ideas of what is important. They are not “wrong,” and you are probably not “right,” all the time. You must become more aware of the many ways in which your culture biases your viewpoints, and be willing to recognize and work around often very subtle, unconscious, stumbling blocks.

- ***Be Careful of Your Assumptions***

Your culture provides you with a whole series of assumptions about the way things are “supposed” to work. For example, your culture provides you with appropriate behavior to be used when meeting another person for the first time. You assess the person’s status based on a number of factors, such as age, sex, appearance, physical size, or any combination of these things. Your greeting and response to the other person is subtly and completely influenced by what your cultural assumptions of what is an “appropriate” way to relate to the other person.

Most Americans think that shaking hands and smiling openly is an appropriate way to greet someone for the first time. This may not be the case; some Asian cultures do not encourage physical contact, and many cultures think that eye contact between strangers ranges from inappropriate to openly rude and challenging. Your cultural assumptions of “correct” behavior may not be those of the other person. Your behavior may seem too familiar, or not respectful enough. In turn, the other person’s behavior may seem very “cold” to you. By becoming more aware of the assumptions that influence your behaviors, you will gradually become better able to work with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This

awareness will also allow you to interact with members of other cultures in a more thoughtful, and less easily misinterpreted, manner.

- ***Develop a Sense of Humor***

Humor, and what is considered funny, often varies greatly between cultures. Anyone who works with people of another culture must, however, develop a “thicker skin.” Often, remarks made in complete good faith are considered to be funny by members of other cultures, or worse, offensive. If and when this situation arises, remember that there may be no offensive intent involved. Responding in a good-natured manner, while being careful not to “make fun” of another person’s culture, may be a good way to further relations.

It is also important to remember that the other person may be trying to use humor to bridge the cultural gap. If you “don’t get” a joke, ask for an explanation, and take the time to try and see it from their perspective. This, and similar, tactics often result in great learning experiences, and gives everyone the opportunity to “lighten up.”

- ***Be Tolerant***

Don’t immediately assume what certain actions or types of “body language” mean. Physical, non-verbal, forms of communication are a very important and subtle part of culturally dictated behaviors. In modern America, speaking clearly, audibly, and often during a meeting is considered a sign of an “outgoing” and “successful” person. This type of “take-charge” personality is usually thought of as “good,” regardless of what age the person may be, or what experience that person has. In many cultures, only those people of a certain age or level of experience are expected to voice opinions during meetings. To do otherwise would be considered presumptuous and overbearing.

If something that you do causes a misunderstanding, based on cultural difference, be patient. The situation may resolve itself, but if not, ask members of the other cultural group what would be the most appropriate course of action. Don’t immediately assume that you can “fix” the situation by further unilateral action. If you are being made fun of, this actually may be an indication that the other group is accepting you, and your relationship is improving. Patience, tolerance, and good humor are valuable tools to have at your command when working cross-culturally.

Where can I find more Information?

The Social Sciences Institute (SSI) offers customized training for working with people of other cultures and societies. Members of the SSI staff will work with you to develop sources of data and training that are specific to your individual situation. For additional information contact Michael Johnson, Cultural Anthropologist, (520-626-4685, mdjnrcs@ag.arizona.edu, Voicecom 9000-865-2655) or Jeff Kenyon, Anthropologist/Sociologist, (501-210-8910, jeff.kenyon@ar.usda.gov, Voicecom 9000-865-2665).

Additional resources on this topic include:

Module 2 of the NRCS National Employee Development Center training course Consultation with American Indian Governments, entitled "Cultural Differences," provides an extended discussion, with several examples and exercises, of how to work between different cultures. Contact Clyde Goodman (NEDC, Ft. Worth, TX, 817-509-3256), or Michael Johnson, SSI, for further information.

The Social Sciences Institute offers a training course entitled "*Developing your Skills to Involve Communities in Implementing Locally Led Conservation.*" Developed in cooperation with Michigan State University and the Michigan State University Extension, Module 7 of this course "Preparing to Work with Underserved Audiences," will provide useful information to people working across cultural lines. Contact Barbara Wallace, (616-942-1503, barbara.wallace@usda.gov, Voicecom 9000-765-2115) or check the SSI webpage (www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/ssi/) for further information.

The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft Focus. By James L. Peacock, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1986.

The Art of Crossing Cultures. By Craig Storti, Intercultural Press, 1990.

The American Anthropological Association. World Wide Web site: www.aaanet.org. Current information and multiple links to virtually all things anthropological.

The Society for Applied Anthropology. World Wide Web site: www.sfaa.net. This web site has the latest information and links to a wide variety of practical applications of anthropological methods and theories.

For more information about the Social Sciences Institute, contact:

Frank Clearfield, Director
Social Sciences Institute
North Carolina A&T State University
Charles H. Moore Building, A-35
Greensboro, NC 27411
(336) 334-7058
clearf@ncat.edu

Product Catalog Available

Are you interested in materials that assist you in implementing locally-led conservation? Or, are you curious about other products available from the Social Sciences Institute?

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Email: barbara.wallace@usda.gov

Visit the SSI Homepage www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/ssi/

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