The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence

Communicating Across Cultures With People From the United States

Contributors: Dianne Hofner Saphiere
Editors: Janet M. Bennett
Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence
Chapter Title: "Communicating Across Cultures With People From the United States"
Pub. Date: 2015
Access Date: December 01, 2015
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks,
Print ISBN: 9781452244280
Online ISBN: 9781483346267

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346267.n40
Print pages: 99-104
©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346267.n40
With the world's largest economy (China's is gaining rapidly, however), by far its largest defense budget, its third largest area (after Russia and Canada), one fifth of its purchasing power, hugely contrasting social trends, and cultural artifacts that reach worldwide (movies, music, literature, products, food, television, etc.), the United States of America is hard to ignore. This entry discusses how to communicate with some of the most misunderstood, loved, and resented people on the planet, the more than 318 million U.S. Americans. It provides a brief overview of some of the demographics and history that are important to understand when communicating with U.S. Americans, a review of core societal values that influence communication patterns, and information about the communication style expectations that are most common in the United States of America.

Brief Demographic Overview

Native American Indians have lived in what is now the United States since at least 12,000 BCE, but in the centuries since the arrival of Leif Ericsson from Scandinavia, and later the founding of the British colonies, it has become a nation of immigrants. The Migration Policy Institute reports that 20% of the world's migrants reside in the United States, and one out of five U.S. Americans speaks a language other than English at home. It is a highly diverse nation ethnically. The U.S. Census Bureau reported for the first time in 2011 that White babies were less than 50% of the infant population, predicting that by 2043 Whites would be a minority of the U.S. population. The 2012 census showed a population comprising 17% Latinos, 13% African Americans, 5% Asians, and 1.4% Native Americans. People of multiracial descent are the fastest growing demographic group.

Despite this diversity, many U.S. Americans still work and socialize primarily with people racially, ethnically, and economically similar to themselves. It is common to witness clear color lines between neighborhoods, for example. The UCLA Civil Rights Project finds that the 38% of Californians who are Latinos (2013 census) are the most segregated for any state in the United States where Latinos reside. Various federal laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, national origin or citizenship status, disability, genetic predisposition or carrier status, age, marital status,

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

sexual orientation, and prior arrest or conviction. Despite its illegal nature, discrimination happens: The 2012 census showed that median earnings for Latinos and Blacks were significantly less than for Asians and Whites and that women earned 77% of what men earned for similar work. **[p. 99 ↓]** Although in 2008, U.S. Americans elected their first Black president, one with a multicultural identity, equality and inclusion are more ideals than realities.

Most U.S. Americans recognize the significant regional differences in their country (e.g., the Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, Mountains, and West Coast), and some scholars have written about these regional cultures. Regional differences include variations in formality, dress, speech and language, food, customs, and even religious and political affiliation (*red states and blue states*, Republican and Democrat dominated, respectively), and they should definitely be factored into communication strategies. Colin Woodard posited that there is no national culture but, rather, 11 regional U.S. cultures. There has been significant research into dialects of U.S. American English, most notably the Harvard Dialect Survey, which has now been subsumed by the Cambridge Online Survey of World Languages.

The United States is a religious nation. Despite an official separation of church and state, government is often linked to religion: “One Nation Under God” appears on its currency, and it is common for politicians to end speeches by saying, “God bless America.” In a 2009 Gallup poll, 65% of citizens reported that religion played an important role in their lives. It is primarily a Christian nation: 53% Protestant and 24% Roman Catholic, according to a 2012 Gallup survey of religious identification. Sixteen percent were without religious affiliation, 1.6% Jewish, 0.7% Buddhist, and 0.5% Muslim. A trend in recent decades has been the rise of the *Christian right*, a group tending toward more conservative social and political values. Traditionally (perhaps dating back to the Puritans), there has been a general moral and sexual conservatism, though in contrast there is also a huge pornography industry and highly sexualized advertising.

The country’s population is 82% urbanized (i.e., living in cities or suburbs). Twenty cities each house nearly 3 million people or more. One quarter of the world’s prisoners are held in the United States’ $3 billion prison–industrial complex. Incarceration is not

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

equitable: Blacks are incarcerated approximately six times more often than Whites and Latinos more than twice as often.

There is no official national language in the United States, though English is the de facto language and an official language in 29 of the country's 50 states. Spanish is an official language in the state of New Mexico and the territory of Puerto Rico.

Core Values Informing Communication Styles

Values are the principles by which people make decisions; they are those ideals that are held dear, that society (via one's families, schools, spiritual traditions, clubs) deems to be good. Understanding a society's core values can help individuals learn how to communicate most effectively with its members. When talking about societal values, one must remember that this is an explanation of the central tendencies for hundreds of millions of people. Each individual, however, is unique, as is each context and relationship. As mentioned, there are ethnic, racial, religious, and regional differences and many contrasting trends within the United States. Keeping this fact in mind, some well-researched generalizations about U.S. Americans' core values are worth offering here.

One of the core values affecting the way people communicate is the degree of importance they ascribe to *efficiency*. U.S. Americans often say that *time is money*. They tend to communicate succinctly, summarizing their main points; details are spared unless specifically requested. Usually, their intention is to show respect for other people's time. Many U.S. Americans are action oriented, focusing on completing the task at hand more than on their relationships with other people. Speed tends to be more important than precision. To those who do not value efficiency in this way, U.S. Americans may seem rude, pushy, or shallow.

Many newcomers to the country are surprised at U.S. Americans' *openness and friendliness*. U.S. Americans may seem quite solicitous in first meetings and greetings, and it is common for them to chat with others while waiting in public spaces. Although

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

genuine, to many foreigners this friendliness can be confusing, as it may seem short-lived, quickly segueing into open, direct debate. Very little in U.S. society may seem private or personal; people may give a visitor to their home a tour of every room in the house, for example, or share stories with new acquaintances that in other areas of the world 30-year friends might not share. In the **[p. 100 ↓]** United States, people say that *the customer is king* or *the customer is always right*. Most stores will accept returns in a friendly and cordial manner.

There is a general belief in U.S. society that personal success is linked to one's own efforts and actions, a sense of *independence and self-reliance*. "If you want a job done right, do it yourself" is a common adage. There is value placed on hard work and what the sociologist Max Weber called the *Protestant work ethic*, working diligently until the task is completed, a view of work itself as virtuous and redemptive. In contrast, the United States is also home to huge welfare rolls, people receiving government benefits for disability, and a highly medicated population (e.g., for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, or social anxiety). While the idea of a sensible work–life balance is often talked about, there is a contrasting belief that professionals will put in whatever hours are needed to get the job done. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the United States is the only nation among advanced economies that does not provide a legal guarantee of paid leave. In Mercer's 2007 survey of 49 nations, the United States ranked 43rd in terms of paid holiday and vacation time. *Teamwork* is also generally valued. U.S. Americans tend to enjoy *friendly competition* and challenges; "May the best man win" is a common way to begin a contest.

Closely linked to the values of self-reliance and hard work is a strong belief in *capitalism*. In an address to the Society of American Newspaper Editors in 1925, the then president Calvin Coolidge said, "The chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world." There is a common belief in the *American Dream* —that those who work hard will get ahead. Interestingly, there has been an increasing trend toward socialism as well, with the federal government stepping up to bail out banks or assume ownership of a failing auto industry, for instance.

A *desire to appear confident and persuasive* frequently manifests itself when U.S. Americans introduce themselves. Foreigners may feel that Americans tend to advertise

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

or sell themselves, persuading a new acquaintance to like or at least respect them, rather than just trying to get to know the person as an individual. In contrast to such confidence, since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, *fear* is an increasing motivator in the United States; gated communities, safety regulations, security screenings, and school lockdowns are commonplace. There is often also a belief in the fundamental *uniqueness of each individual*. U.S. Americans frequently are not pleased, when traveling abroad or working in multinational contexts, to be labeled “U.S. American,” particularly when there is no apparent recognition given to their other affiliations or their personal characteristics.

Most societies have paradoxes, and one irony in U.S. society is the juxtaposition of rules and freedoms. In general, the United States is very *rule bound* ; people are expected to behave in certain ways; rules are rules regardless of the situation; lawyers and contracts are everywhere; and the written word is generally binding (signs, contracts), reflecting what Fons Trompenaars calls *universalism*, the tendency to apply regulations uniformly. On the other hand, perhaps because there are so many rules that can’t be broken (tax law, employment law, immigration law, neighborhood association rules, etc.), in their social lives U.S. Americans tend to *desire freedom*, *choice*, and a *lack of obligation*, reflecting individualistic self-expression.

Egalitarianism is another hallmark of U.S. American values, varying greatly by region, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age. The *rags-to-riches* person is much admired in U.S. culture, the person who moves from poverty to wealth through the individual’s own efforts. There has traditionally been a large middle class, although it is shrinking and the gap between the more and the less wealthy is rapidly increasing.

Informality is perhaps based on this belief in egalitarianism. First names are commonly used, even in the first meeting. Professional dress tends toward the casual (this varies by region and industry). U.S. Americans tend to favor informal postures, speech, and settings; meetings in a coffee shop or reception area may feel surprisingly informal to some visitors. Salutations and closings are frequently omitted from e-mails. U.S. Americans’ informality does not indicate disrespect or lack of seriousness. Many of them equate informality with comfort: Their intention in using first names, relaxed postures, and an informal communication style is to put themselves and others at ease.

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Joking and sarcasm among friends and coworkers is frequently used as a form of bonding.

[p. 101 ↓] The proverb "A rolling stone gathers no moss," which cautions people in many parts of the world to slow down, is used with the opposite meaning in the United States: Keep moving, or grow old and stagnant. *Change* is seen as positive, and the future is generally perceived with optimism. People will experiment to improve something or get it to work. Job mobility is common; U.S. Americans remain at a job an average of 4.4 years. Risk tolerance is generally fairly high. *Entrepreneur* magazine estimates that 60% to 70% of all jobs are created by the 26 million small businesses in the United States. A common saying is "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Another practice that visitors might misinterpret is that U.S. Americans call their home *America* and themselves *Americans*. To others from the Western Hemisphere, they seem to appropriate the entire continent! Their season-ending professional baseball tournament is called the World Series, and shop signboards may say, "World's best …" (burgers, chili, car deals, etc.). Generally, such statements do not indicate any personal arrogance but, rather, a tendency to overstatement and *optimism*. U.S. American speech includes many superlatives. *Great*, *awesome*, and *super* are just a few that occur in daily conversations. Some foreigners call the United States an *I love you* culture, because they perceive U.S. Americans to be quick to form friendships, effusive in their language, and swift with positive feedback and encouragement.

Communication Styles

Communication style refers to the patterns of verbal and nonverbal behavior people prefer when communicating in specific situations. Communication style differences, which usually manifest themselves below the conscious level, give rise to countless misunderstandings and miscommunication, particularly in intercultural situations.

It is essential to remember that context rules in communication: It matters who is speaking with whom, where and when, and what relationship and history the speakers have with each other. U.S. Americans are hugely diverse, as already noted, so outsiders (and other insiders, for that matter) must factor context as well as personality

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

into their efforts to communicate with them. Of course, one's own cultural background will also affect one's reactions to U.S. Americans. There will thus be many exceptions to every generalization offered in this entry; the points herein are intended to encourage learning, not to form stereotypes.

U.S. Americans tend to communicate in a *low-context manner*, a concept first proposed by the anthropologist E. T. Hall. People who speak up, honor their word, say what they mean, and mean what they say are generally respected. Clarity is valued; when communicating with U.S. Americans it may be wise to speak in a straightforward yet polite manner and make direct requests. Words tend to be taken at face value, and there is not generally an expectation that the listener will read between the lines. Subtle language or *hints* may pass by unrecognized. Someone who says "yes" even though his or her body screams "no" may later be reminded, "But you agreed!" Newcomers will often remark that U.S. Americans are *literal*, answering a question as it was asked rather than providing a larger answer to an implied question.

U.S. Americans frequently use words such as *would* or *perhaps* to soften their directness and to sound more polite. They generally try to avoid arguments and to seek agreement. In public or professional venues, people strive to speak in a manner that is *politically correct* and not disparaging of any group of people.

Listening style in the United States is often compared to a tennis game: One person speaks, and the other responds with a rejoinder ("Really?" or "Is that so?") or a story of his or her own. Typical conversation thus proceeds in a back-and-forth, give-and-take fashion, with the parties involved frequently taking turns speaking. There is often more emphasis on sharing one's own stories than on clarifying, summarizing, or verbally empathizing. Explanation style is usually inductive and linear (sequential, step by step), and persuasion plays a key role. U.S. Americans tend to be uncomfortable with silence.

In both business and social life, firm handshakes are a common form of greeting both within and between genders. Regionally, a hug, pat on the shoulder, or kiss may be used to greet friends, colleagues, or family members. Greetings are generally spoken in loud voices and accompanied by big smiles. People stand about an arm's length apart, the comfortable distance for shaking hands. Entering into someone's personal space or bumping another in public is generally accompanied by an **[p. 102 ↓]** apology

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

(“Excuse me”). When meeting someone new, an attempt is generally made to find a common connection: a person, experience, or interest. One of the first questions asked of a new acquaintance is “What do you do for a living?” U.S. Americans spend a lot of time discussing work and family. The daily greeting “How are you?” generally equates to “Hello”; it is not normally a request for information, and the expected answer is a perfunctory “Fine, and you?” or perhaps “Busy, as usual. How about you?” Keeping oneself busy and having a lot to do are viewed as indicators of one’s importance or even success.

Sports metaphors (e.g., *step up to the plate*, *throw a Hail Mary pass*, *do a rain check*) permeate the language, and a basic familiarity with popular sports can greatly aid communication and rapport. Baseball is the traditional national sport; American football, basketball, and hockey round out the top four. Lacrosse is the fastest growing sport in the United States, and soccer is quickly gaining popularity. Gun metaphors also proliferate in U.S. American English (e.g., *caught in the crossfire*, *a straight shooter*), often startling visitors. Such wording perhaps has its roots in the Wild West, but in modern times, just under 50% of U.S. American households own a firearm; there are more privately owned guns in the United States than in any other country, per capita and total.

Some topics, such as abortion, creationism, gun control, immigration, and the legal standing of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people (a group usually referred to as LGBT) are highly politicized. Newcomers to the United States may be surprised to find that friendships and trust can be damaged or broken over comments that seem harmless to them. Conversations on such topics even among educated, mature adults can quickly become emotional; at times, it may seem that reasoned, polite discourse is a lost art. Another thorny subject for many newcomers (and U.S. Americans) is foreign policy. A vast majority of U.S. Americans may not be well versed in international relations or history. In many circles, there is no widespread interest in foreign policy, and there is a quickness to forget any controversial role their government has played on the world stage. In contrast, there is a significant patriotic sense of pride that can cause discussions on international relations to become sensitive or heated. Foreigners may feel that U.S. Americans do not welcome their opinions on U.S. foreign policy. Wise visitors will exercise caution regarding the topic of conversation and the sharing of personal opinions on sensitive subjects, a useful rule in many countries.

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Complaints and problem sharing are generally heard as requests for advice or help. Value is placed on presenting constructive solutions and having a can-do attitude. *Networking*, purposefully searching for contacts that might be in a position to help one accomplish one's goals, is common in U.S. society. It may seem that people are seeking first to determine whether a new acquaintance can be useful to them and only then to pursue a relationship. U.S. Americans are normally quite punctual, arriving at and even departing from parties at previously agreed-on times, though this custom varies a little by region, age, ethnic group, and social class.

Communicating in the Workplace

Dress in the workplace tends to vary by region. The East is generally a bit more formal than the West, where cowboy boots and hats are not rare in rural areas. *Casual Fridays* originally meant that people could wear jeans to work on Fridays, but this custom has gradually taken over most of the workweek, with khaki slacks and a polo or dress shirt common in most professional settings. Some industries, such as law and finance, remain more formal and conservative. In everyday social settings, shorts, jeans, T-shirts, and even workout wear are very common. In terms of the workplace, supervisors often have an open-door policy vis-à-vis their supervisees. U.S. Americans' tendency to contribute to a discussion regardless of their rank or age also demonstrates the value they place on equality. Most people in the United States are uncomfortable with a hierarchy or class system, although such a system is very much alive and well in the country.

At work, U.S. Americans are accustomed to writing short sentences, making brief notes, and using bullet points; too much detail is viewed as unnecessary and as obscuring the main point. Presentations generally use an outline form with previews and summaries. ("Tell them what you'll tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them" is frequent advice to presenters, a reflection of the preference for a linear and direct communication style.) In the United States, it is common to begin a presentation with a joke, an approach that is not always effective across cultures. Care should be taken not to be offensive. **[p. 103 ↓]** Time should always be left for questions, and interruptions during an informal presentation (to ask questions) are usually not seen as rude. The goal of a presentation is usually to *leave them wanting more*, to engage with

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

the audience, rather than to develop a logical argument in thorough detail. Meetings may seem relaxed but are generally serious affairs; attendees are expected to come prepared. Agendas are followed, and action items (who, what, by when) are normally summarized. Summarizing and expressing thanks at the end of a meeting are common.

Micromanaging occurs when a supervisor questions the employee on even the smallest actions taken and oversees the most minor details. It is generally perceived as demonstrating an undesirable lack of trust, since independence and self-reliance are valued. Planning and preparation are important to most U.S. Americans, though flexibility to meet changing demands and realities is also expected. Leaders may consult others during the decision-making process, but in the end the decision is not usually based on consensus or the majority's opinion but on the leader's preference. There are rigid antidiscrimination policies for hiring staff and for preventing sexual harassment. Lawyers are commonly involved in formulating these policies and even the early stages of any negotiation.

The United States has a large voice on the world stage with a hugely diversified population, who are generally optimistic, hardworking, and friendly. Intercultural competence provides a solid basis for learning to communicate and collaborate with U.S. Americans.

See alsoBeliefs, Values, Norms, Customs (Definitions); Body Language (Haptics); Cognitive Styles Across Cultures; Cultural Patterns; Facial Expressions/Universal; High-Context and Low-Context Communication; Intercultural Nonverbal Communication; Intercultural Verbal Communication Styles; Politeness Strategies: Rapport Theory; Value Dimensions: Trompenaars

Dianne HofnerSaphiere

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346267.n40
Further Readings

Ancheta, A. (2006). Race, rights and the Asian American experience (2nd ed.). Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Asitimbay, D. (2004). What's up America? San Diego, CA: Culturelink Press.

©2015 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Davis, J. C., & Lanier, A. (2004). Living in the USA . Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey.

Ghisini, E., & Blendstrup, A. (2008). Communicating the American way: A guide to business communication in the U.S . Cupertino, CA: Happy About Books.

Hoxie, F. E. (Ed.). (1996). Encyclopedia of North American Indians: Native American history, culture and life from Paleo-Indians to the present . Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Roll, S., & Irwin, M. (2008). The invisible border: Latinos in America . Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey.

Saphiere, D. H., Mikk, B. K., & DeVries, B. I. (2005). Communication highwire: Leveraging the power of diverse communication styles . Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.

Shipler, D. K. (1997). A country of strangers: Blacks and Whites in America . New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Simons, G., & Kim, E. Y. (2012). Cultural detective USA (2nd ed.). Retrieved from http://www.culturaldetective.com

Woodard, C. (2012). American nations: A history of the 11 regional cultures of North America . New York, NY: Penguin.