



Grace Bible Church –Global Impact Ministry

Short Term Trip Playbook

Supplement – Cultural Training

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Introduction

This companion to the Short Term Trip Playbook will assist each team member to prepare for their trip. Travelling to another country assaults your senses and understanding of what's "right." Your transition will be easier if you are aware of your own culture and the culture of your destination.

Read "North American Belief Systems" to help you understand where you are coming from. Review any material provided by your team lead in order to grasp the culture of your destination country.

North American Belief Systems

Introduction

"The Dutch are thrifty." "Germans are hard workers." "Japanese never show their emotions." "Americans are friendly." How many times have we heard expressions like these, or said them ourselves? Though we don't want to stereotype others through blanket statements, yet these expressions do have a certain usefulness, and a degree of truth to them. Broadly speaking there are certain behavior patterns or ways of thinking that are valued highly by most of the members of these cultures. These behavior patterns or ways of thinking are what we have termed "belief systems", concepts or ways of life that people follow for the sake of proving or maintaining their self-worth.

In this article we shall explore ten of the belief systems held in high value by middle class North Americans. The purpose in doing this is to help you along in the process of identifying those belief systems which you value highly. As you read through each belief system, take time to think through how it is reflected in your own value system. Try to identify if you place a high value, a medium value or a low value on it, and the kinds of things you do that reflect you hold it as a value. Most likely you will feel that you do not hold every belief system as a value. It is unlikely that every member of a culture would hold a given belief system as a value. We can say that a belief system is a value in a culture if it is held as a high value by a majority of the members of that culture.

Ten North American Belief Systems

Control of Environment

The different ways in which people unconsciously view the world can be placed on a continuum. At one end, man is master over nature, while at the other, man submits to nature realizing he cannot change it. Fatalism and the view that man works with nature rather than attempting to master it is typical of the thought of many non-Western people. In contrast, Americans usually conceive of nature as something to be conquered and made over to suit man's needs. Americans view activity in this direction as good, and conversely interpret any sign of reluctance to challenge the natural order as laziness or indifference.

A high value on "Control of Environment" shows itself in certain attitudes and behavior patterns. An American sees himself as being distinct from his environment and able to change it. He tends to feel comfortable with change - if his house is cold and drafty, he insulates it. If his job is unfulfilling, he gets a

new job description...or a new job. Conversely, an American becomes uncomfortable when he cannot control his circumstances. Have you ever had your freedom of movement curtailed because you lacked transportation, or because it was unsafe for you to be out on your own? Have you ever had to live in a room you didn't like, or with a roommate you didn't get along with? If so, then you have experienced a curtailment of your ability to control your environment.

Progress

Societies differ in their attitudes toward change. Non-Western people do not always welcome change, and seek to find guidance for their lives from their traditions and their past. Americans are more inclined to make decisions in terms of an anticipated future, viewing change and material progress as being positive and desirable. As a result the American may view success as requiring innovation and change and may reject as unmotivated a national who is satisfied with traditional ways of doing things. The national may have difficulty understanding the American who indicates that he is dissatisfied with what he has by switching from one thing to another.

A high value on "Progress" manifests itself in a number of ways. Americans tend not to expect permanency in their lives, be it living situations, jobs or relationships. An American who values progress believes that anything can be improved...and should be improved. Because of the rapid rate of change in technology, American products are usually not built and sold with the idea that they will last a lifetime. Instead, we expect things to become obsolete.

Materialism

Americans deal easily with tangible things that can be measured, but are not as comfortable in dealing with spiritual and aesthetic values which are not easily quantified. The physical world, the world of the senses which is explorable through empirical research is more real to us than the spiritual realm. Americans make a sharp distinction between the physical and spiritual realms and find it difficult to see the two as being co-mingled.

Our high value on materialism manifests itself in how we define what is the good life - comfort and convenience. Convenience is very important to Americans and is reflected in our institutions - drive-in restaurants, drive-in banks, drive-in churches (an important factor for church growth in America is having ample parking available at the church), and even a drive-through funeral chapel. We are accustomed to a very high standard of living and find it difficult to believe that people can be happy in the midst of need. Generally speaking, when asked to rate several different countries as to which is "best" the American will judge on a material basis which was most "convenient" (e.g., good plumbing, private bathroom, phone service, people spoke English, etc.)

Personal Success

Social status is a key dimension in understanding human motivation. Members of a traditional society are likely to regard their role as fixed from birth and not to be questioned. Their strongly developed sense of "affiliation", or social need for the company of others, restrains them from competing with

their peers, whose company they need. In contrast, Americans are members of a strong prestige-achieved culture. Our self-esteem is derived from our ability to attain personal success in what we undertake to do. We view it as natural that we should desire to get ahead in life and view competition against others as a normal part of life.

We encourage personal ambition in each other, and have trouble accepting people who do not manifest signs of ambition. We are very forgiving toward winners, but have no place for failures, even in the church. Our cultural heroes are men and women who have measured themselves against a challenge and won - the self-made businessman, the star athlete, the pastor of a large and growing church.

Autonomy

The American considers himself to be an individual, responsible for his own actions and in control of his own destiny. He assumes that he has the right to make the decisions that affect his own life (e.g., his life's work, marriage partner, etc.), and hesitates to make decisions concerning another's life without consulting him. By way of contrast, in certain cultures such decisions may be made by others for the individual or jointly with him. In other words, the American sees himself as an individual apart from the group, while many non-Americans perceive themselves as being a part of the group.

To see the strength of this belief system among your values, think back through the major decisions of your life. Who decided where you would attend school and what you would major in? Who decided what vocation you would enter, and that you would be a missionary? Who chose your friends, or selected your spouse? When Americans serve under the leadership of nationals who do not value autonomy they can easily become frustrated when important decisions affecting their lives are made without consultation. Conversely, national leaders can easily misinterpret American autonomy for rebellion. Americans in leadership positions can appear foolish to nationals when they consult with those to whom they give orders.

Puritanism

The Puritan ethic with its emphasis on hard work, responsibility, and impersonal service to others contrasts with the relaxed, spontaneous behavior of non-Western people. Non-Western people do not understand the American's sharp separation of work and play, or his impartial sense of duty and service to others. The American who feels a worker should put all his efforts into working during the time he is "at work" may be frustrated by a national who seems to take it easy and "wastes" time.

Our strong value on "Puritanism" shows up in our commitment to work. Often it is his work which gives an American his identity. When we meet a stranger one of our first questions is "What do you do for a living?" Frequently when Americans overseas are prevented from doing their "jobs", they suffer self-esteem problems.

Moralistic Orientation

Americans, more than most people, tend to make clear-cut ethical distinctions that affect all people/situations equally and impersonally. When faced with a choice of alternatives, the American in

his heart knows that among them there is a best choice and feels a compulsion to choose the best of those alternatives. People in non-Western nations tend to have less urge to convert others to their way of thinking, nor do they tend to make impersonal moral judgments.

The contrast between American and non-Western morality usually reflects differences in the content rather than the strength of moral convictions. What appears to the American as a lack of honesty is more likely to be a different concept of what behaviors are considered dishonest by the non-Western person.

Humanitarianism

Combined with the American's moralistic orientation and his sense of equality among people is the motivation of generosity and compassion which is particularly noticeable in his support of the "underdog". Americans have a general concern for the downtrodden everywhere. Our concern is not limited by reason of tribal allegiance, geography, politics or religion. The non-Westerner may not understand this non-personal sense of obligation held by Americans, while Americans find it difficult to accept the non-Westerner's lack of concern for those outside of his own family or group.

Time Orientation

To an American, time is valuable and therefore not to be wasted. We view time as being linear, flowing from out of the past, through this brief present moment and into the future. We tend to place more emphasis on the future than on the past. We view time much like a material thing which can be mastered, controlled, measured and manipulated for good advantage. The non-Westerner may view time as cyclic and undifferentiated something to be passively accepted and perhaps enjoyed. Many non-Westerners are far more past-oriented than we are and pay little attention to the future.

Our preoccupation with time can be seen in our proverbs. We save time, keep time, watch the time, redeem time, make time count twice, spend time, invest time, take time out, time ourselves, keep track of time, and occasionally, to our shame, waste or kill time.

Scientific Orientation

The Western world has adopted empirically based reasoning as the unquestioned way of understanding the physical world. We often reason in terms of probabilities, i.e., "There is a 20% chance of rain tomorrow". We also feel comfortable dealing with hypothetical situations, "If you were to die tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?" We like to verify things for ourselves rather than just relying on the word of others. We like things made clear, and do not as a rule deal well with ambiguity.

The people of other nations are not necessarily as ready to accept scientific explanations as the most rational way of seeing reality, nor do they necessarily see the need for disciplined analysis of a problem as a part of problem solving. Non-Westerners find the Western preoccupation with facts, figures and techniques not only confusing, but also impersonal and demeaning. Thinking in probabilities seems ridiculous to them because they know that an event either will happen or it won't. Many find the

challenge to imagine themselves in a hypothetical situation impossible, especially when it requires them to project themselves into another person's experience.

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