



**GUIDE
TO WORKING IN
MINNESOTA**

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SOME BROAD CHARACTERISTICS ABOUT AMERICANS

Introduction

To better understand acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the workplace in the United States, we first need to address some of the general characteristics of the people you will be working with and for.

Following are broad characterizations of some American cultural patterns (also referred to as cultural generalizations). Cultural generalizations can be useful as a general guide to anticipating and discussing people's reactions, attitudes, and behaviors in a neutral way. However, keep in mind that no cultural generalization will ever apply to everyone in a culture (no matter how small or isolated that culture) because individual personalities and backgrounds always play a significant role in how people think and act. American society is also enormously diverse. Important differences exist between geographical regions, between rural and urban areas, and between social classes. In addition, the presence of millions of immigrants who came to the United States from all corners of the world with their own culture and values adds even more variety and flavor to American life.

The characteristics described below are some of the traits thought of as being "typically American."

Individuality, Individual Differences and Diversity

Probably above everything else, Americans consider themselves individuals. There are strong family ties and strong loyalties to groups, but individuality and individual rights are most important. When they do join groups, Americans still view themselves as being special, just a little different from other members of the same group. If this seems like a self-centered attitude, it also leads Americans to an honest respect for other individuals and an insistence on human equality and respect for individual differences. For example, "U.S. college campuses require certain standards of behavior that achieve a safe, fair, and productive learning environment for everyone. Many of the standards that students are expected to grasp relate to the diverse student population on campus in terms of ethnicity, race, country of origin, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Standards and behaviors seek to ensure the rights and responsibilities of all students, regardless of background. Most institutions that define the rights and responsibilities of their students also provide a code of conduct to guide their behavior. For example, the code may permit free speech but prohibit and penalize behavior that harms others." Diversity is not only respected but promoted on campus. For example, in the United States, under the guidance of federal and state laws, there is a broad effort at most institutions to ensure that faculty (as well as staff and students) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. This will ensure that students will benefit from the experience, knowledge, creativity, and perspectives of faculty with various backgrounds.

Independence and Self-Reliance

Related to respect for individuality are American traits of independence and self-reliance. From an early age, children are taught to "stand on their own two feet," an idiom meaning to be independent. Independence allows for freedom of choice. For example, students have a great deal of freedom to choose their major field of study, their own classes, and research topics and designs. They also have the ability to change their academic path, almost at any point in their education.

With freedom of choice comes the need for self reliance: individuals must learn how to make their own decisions. It is their responsibility to learn about available options, gather information and seek advice. Furthermore, it is considered normal that anyone should look out for his or her own self-interest first and foremost.

Americans also take credit for what they accomplish as individuals. Individual performance is an important measure of success.

Honesty and Frankness

Honesty and frankness (you might define this as “directness”) are two more aspects of American individuality. You will find people expressing a variety of opinions anywhere and anytime. Individual opinion is more important to Americans than personal honor or “saving face.” Americans may seem blunt at times, and in polite conversations they may bring up topics and issues that you find embarrassing, controversial, or even offensive. Americans are quick to get to the point and do not spend much time on social niceties. This directness encourages Americans to talk over disagreements and to try to patch up misunderstandings themselves, rather than ask a third party to mediate disputes.

Individual Perspective and Critical Thinking

Individual thinking is therefore one of the cornerstone of the U.S. classroom environment, especially in the fields of study of social sciences, education and the humanities. Students are encouraged to think critically about content, express perspectives in class, participate in dialogue, and demonstrate practical understanding. The role of the instructor in the classroom is that of presenting content and facilitating dialogue, rather than being the source of knowledge and clarifying and interpreting written texts. Of course, this also depends on the professor’s style as well as the field of study.

Informality

Again, “individuality” is the key word when describing Americans, whether it is their personalities or their style of dress. Generally though, Americans like to dress and entertain informally and treat each other in a very informal way, even when there is a great difference in age or social standing. Students and professors often call each other by their first names. Some international visitors may consider this informality disrespectful, while others might consider it too friendly; however, it is part of American culture. Although there are times when Americans are respectful of, and even sentimental about, tradition, in general there is little concern for set social rules.

Equality and Fairness

Equality is for Americans one of their most cherished values. This concept is so important to Americans that they have even given it a religious basis. They say all people “have been created equal.” Most Americans believe that God views all humans alike without regard to intelligence, physical condition, economic status or rank. In secular terms this belief is translated into the assertion that all people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Americans differ in opinions about how to make this ideal into reality. Yet virtually all agree that equality is an important civic and social goal.

The importance of equality and fairness is reflected in all aspects of society, including academia. For example, faculties are often recruited through a public and competitive process conducted by a search committee. The committee is composed, among others, of potential departmental colleagues and administrative staff, whose task is to assess the process and assure diversity of candidate pool and equality of opportunity.

Another example of the importance of equality in American culture is the fact that, in higher education, students themselves can play a role in establishing standards and evaluating their course and the faculty's performance. In most institutions, at the end of the semester or quarter, professors or instructors ask that an evaluation of the course be completed by the students. The evaluations forms are anonymous. Students' responses to questions on those forms are taken quite seriously, and sometimes considered in faculty tenure decisions. So, instructors evaluate students, students evaluate instructors, and classmates evaluate each other.

Competitiveness

Americans place a high value on achievement and this leads them to constantly compete against each other. Most Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual and in any system.

You will find friendly, and not-so-friendly, competition everywhere. The American style of friendly joking or banter, of "getting in the last word," and the quick and witty reply are subtle forms of competition. Although such behavior is natural to Americans, some international visitors might find it overbearing and disagreeable.

Americans can also be obsessed with records of achievement in sports, in business, or even in more mundane things. Books and movies, for example, are sometimes judged not so much on quality but on how many copies are sold or on how many dollars of profit are realized. In the university as well, emphasis is placed on achievement, on ranking (which is based on a combination of factors, including degree and other qualifications, research and teaching performance, and tenure), on amount and quality of professional publications (within a relevant field of research), on number and size of grants received, and on service (defined as sitting on various committees and participating in professional organizations, especially in a leadership role).

Collaboration and Teamwork

Even if Americans are often competitive, they also have a good sense of teamwork and of cooperating with others to achieve a specific goal. As John C. Maxwell writes in his book, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, "One is too small a number to achieve greatness."

Collaboration and teamwork are, after all, a reflection of decentralization, because involve concepts such as the ability to share power and the responsibility to make decisions. In addition, teams involve more people, ideas, resources, and energy than almost any individual possesses; teams maximize a leader's potential and minimize his/her shortcomings; Weaknesses are more exposed in individuals; teams provide multiple perspectives on needs and goals; individual insight is seldom as broad and deep as a group's; teams share the credit for victory and the blame for losses; teams keep leaders accountable for the goal. Individuals are connected to no one and are accountable to no one; teams can simply do more than an individual.

So, both individual performance and the ability to be a team player are regarded in the American workplace as two ways to measure of success.

The Value of Personal Relationships

Relationships in the United States are most often determined by some kind of function. One can have friends from church, from school, or from work. These relationships are often focused on the interest of the people in that category. Sometimes there is overlap, and one person is in all categories. The professional relationship is the one that does not overlap with other categories. Even if you are invited to socialize after work, remember: friendliness and friendship are two very different things. And you are not required to accept the invitation.

Americans are usually able to separate business situations from personal interests. In the United States, rules are rules, and they are applied equally and universally, regardless of connections. Although exceptions exist, they are rare. People cannot expect favors because of connections. Government officials do not give special deals or inside information to family and friends. College professors use the same evaluation standards for all students. Faculty is hired on their own merit, because of their credentials, not because they receive a special recommendation. In fact, companies and institutions have rules to guard against favoritism and nepotism. Some have strict guidelines for giving and accepting gifts. And even if gifts are allowed, they are certainly appreciated, but do not make a difference. On the workplace, a person does not receive special treatment from their supervisor because they went to the same school or come from the same town. Workers do not have obligations to their supervisors that are not related to their jobs and vice versa. Certainly there are exceptions, but in general this is the rule. While harmonious human relationships are important, Americans like to separate the personal from the professional, so that they can enjoy each on its own merit and encourage fairness for everybody. "Never mix business with pleasure" is a common saying.