

Effects of Culture

From Baghdad to Yongsan, from Port-au-Prince to Kabul, U.S. Soldiers interact every day with cultures vastly different from what they find back home. For some, this cultural engagement can be an exciting and enriching experience; others are left anxious and confused, uncomfortable with standards and customs that are foreign and often strange.

However, learning a new culture and adapting to it can be a powerful tool in the quest to both understand the enemy and influence would-be allies. To help young NCOs discover and make the most of these connections, a new lesson was incorporated into the updated Warrior Leader Course that combines cultural awareness with counterinsurgency principles.

“If you understand culture, you can use it to your advantage — especially in trying to win over the hearts and minds of a local populace,” said Carl Carlson, a training specialist on the team that wrote the new course at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas. “We tried to help the young Soldier understand how his or her interactions with the local people fit into the big picture of what the Army may be trying to do in Afghanistan or Iraq or Haiti or wherever. Their interactions have to be based on a good understanding of the culture there, because we’re guests in those countries.”

The lesson begins with the fundamental elements that comprise culture and continues to cover the advantageous or detrimental ways that Soldiers use such awareness:

COMPONENTS OF CULTURE: Though there are several definitions, culture is essentially a system of shared values, beliefs, behaviors and norms that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another. It is not inherited genetically, but is rather a social and psychological construct passed down from generation to generation. It also changes over time as a group responds to changing environmental or



Photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Douglas
Sgt. 1st Class Miguel Casarez and other Soldiers of 4th Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, meet with Naji Mohammed Ahmed, a Kurdish village leader, who invited the men into his home for tea and discussion in May 2009.

social conditions. Learning how to react to different cultures is vital to avoid culture shock that can hinder morale and the mission.

STEREOTYPES & BIASES: A stereotype is an inaccurate generalization based on opinion. Whether positive or negative, they can lead to false expectations or poor decisions. Generalizations can be helpful, however, when they are based on keen observations of reality coupled with knowledge of the culture and its background; this is the crux of cultural awareness. On the other hand, when baseless prejudices impair the judgment of an individual, this

is bias and patently unfair. Maintaining biases usually closes the mind to new information, creating a dangerous impediment to good decision-making and effective communication.

INSURGENCY & COUNTERINSURGENCY: Appreciating the effects of culture is imperative to understanding one of the most important topics Soldiers are faced with today: insurgency and counterinsurgency. Knowing the background and history of a culture can help Soldiers understand why a movement feels compelled to weaken or overthrow its government through subversion or armed conflict. As insurgents battle to obtain political power, counterinsurgents use all tools at their disposal to harness the population’s support.

The WLC lesson emphasizes the role of junior NCOs in counterinsurgency operations, quoting David Kilcullen’s *Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency*, which states, “Counterinsurgency is a squad and platoon leader’s war, and often a private Soldier’s war. Battles are won or lost in moments: Whoever can bring combat power to bear in seconds, on a street corner, will win.” A comprehensive awareness of the local culture is indispensable in this effort and, when made use of appropriately, can be a potent tactical advantage for any NCO.



THE COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

While there are many dimensions to culture, the four aspects categorized below are the essential components Soldiers are most likely to encounter downrange.

Values:

- ✓ **Right and wrong:** Values form the basis for a group's moral and ethical conduct. They are the guide to culturally appropriate behavior.
- ✓ **Positive values:** These are rewarded by society. Those displaying loyalty, a good work ethic or equality, for example, are often granted special praise, financial gain or higher status.
- ✓ **Negative values:** Dishonesty, theft or lying, for instance, are punished by society, whether informally, like avoidance, or formally, like prison.

Beliefs:

- ✓ **Shared view of reality:** This is how a group sees the world — its idea of why things are as they are, how humans came to be or why people get sick, to name a few. Often, beliefs are so ingrained into a culture that they are not subject to investigation.
- ✓ **Physical beliefs:** These are explanations of how the world works or how humans relate to the environment: The Earth revolves around the Sun; humans are at the top of the food chain, for example.
- ✓ **Non-physical beliefs:** These are attempts to explain how the supernatural works or how humans relate to God. Concepts like magic, spirits, faith and fear are often involved.

Behaviors:

- ✓ **Observable patterns of action:** This is the easiest component of culture for an outsider to observe. By watching the habitual ways

people do things, the observer can usually figure out what the underlying values and beliefs of the culture are but may not understand them.

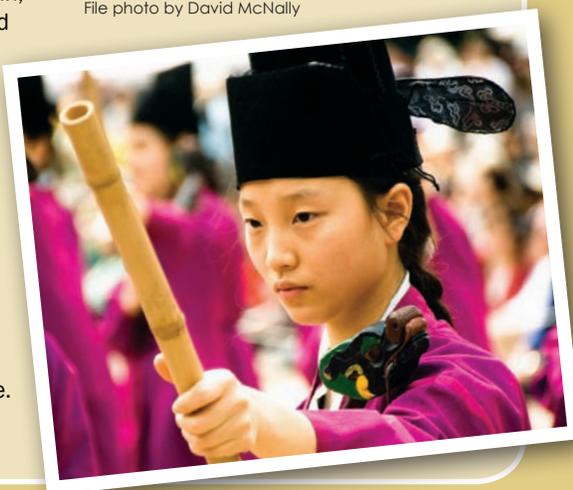
- ✓ **Habitual behaviors:** These patterns of behavior are common among all or most of the group — a consistent way of greeting that is typically practiced, for example.
- ✓ **Personal behaviors:** These are more idiosyncratic behaviors — variations practiced uniquely by individuals.

Norms:

- ✓ **Range of permissible behaviors:** This is how a culture expresses its values and beliefs through expected behavior.
- ✓ **Almost everyone conforms:** As they are the accepted standards of behavior, people generally follow norms and expect others to do so, too.
- ✓ **Can be used strategically:** By knowing the norms of a culture, one can predict how people will behave in a given situation. Such cultural strategies consciously anticipate a group's behavior in a specific situation.

A young girl performs a ceremonial dance at U.S. Army Garrison-Yongsan, South Korea in July 2008.

File photo by David McNally



Culture shock: How to cope

LEARN BEFOREHAND

Research the culture before you are immersed. A little reading will help you be more familiar with, and understanding of, the culture and its differences.

AVOID OFFENSE

Try not to be offended or to be offensive when dealing with the local populace. Misunderstandings can create bad feelings on both sides.

BE OPEN-MINDED

Be tolerant and accepting of unfamiliar aspects. What may be strange to you could be how the culture has done things for hundreds or thousands of years.

TAKE A TIME-OUT

You may need to take a break from cultural engagement in order to lessen the stress and strain of adjustment.

MAINTAIN ROUTINES

Routines keep the familiar fresh. Exercise, personal study time and hobbies remind you of your existing habits and customs.

EDUCATE ABOUT YOUR OWN CULTURE

You're a subject-matter expert in your culture, after all. But, remember to be respectful of the culture you are a guest in and not attempt to "prove" your culture is better or more important.