CROSSING CULTURES

Bottom Line

The question for everyone on an Expedition: Is what I’m thinking, saying or doing honoring to our hosts, serving their culture and community and ultimately building trust and enhancing our relationship?

Top Ten Ways To Build Trust

1. Pre-Arrival
   Become a student of the place you are going; in particular learn a bit of the language, culture, history and politics. Communication is vital to the mission, so even learning basic phrases communicates that you care. Bring some pictures to share – your family, friends, home – these are good conversation starters or helpful when communication gaps are present. Be aware of any clothing restrictions before packing and always err on the side of conservative dress.

2. Arrival
   If you have brought gifts to share with people you meet (shirts, toys, school supplies, hygiene kits, sports equipment, etc.) be prepared that even though it may not feel as satisfying, it’s critical that you give these gifts directly to your hosts and allow them distribute these items at the right time and place. They know the needs of their community and ministry intimately and are the best judge. Finally, if your Expedition is doing home stays, it’s appropriate to bring a small host gifts for the family. Make sure to give the gift to the eldest member in the household. Trip Leaders should inquire if there are any specific needs or wants prior to arrival.

3. Food
   Learn and understand the importance of food (or lack thereof) in a culture. Learn about local staples and food traditions. Use their utensils. Show honor and enthusiasm for trying the local fare by always receiving and at least trying the food you are given without commentary or complaint. Eating a power bar during a mealtime is so not cool.

4. Gender
   In many cultures, public displays of affection may be different or non-existent. Maybe men and women do not socialize publicly, maybe men hold hands with other men (in a brotherly fashion), and maybe people greet each other with a kiss. Please be sensitive within your own teams to the cultural norms as well as steering clear of distracting in-team romances.

   NOTE: please err on the side of caution. While various cultures have different ways of expressing fondness for the opposite gender, never compromise your own level of comfort for the sake of cultural sensitivity. Please communicate to a trip leader if those boundaries have been crossed.
5. **Communication Styles**
Some cultures are very straightforward and confrontational, others are indirect and passive and still others are non-verbal yet physical. Always be observant. Please remember that your experience and understanding is from a US context. For example:
- After high school we go to “college” but in many places, schooling beyond the 10th or 11th grade is known as “University”.
- Football is BIG in the US, but in many other cultures, Fútbol is HUGE!

6. **Time**
In some cultures time is very fluid and free flowing, but in others it’s very precise and exact. Flexibility with more flexibility and one last dash of flexibility will get you far on an Expedition.

7. **Respect**
Many cultures offer respect to the senior members of their society, some to the youngest. Make sure to show due respect and watch how the locals show respect. Putting yourselves in someone else’s shoes is always the best way to adapt to another culture and shows a great deal of honor to your hosts.

8. **Humor**
It can be a unifying cultural bridge for sure. Being self-deprecating gets you far in any culture. Be especially sensitive concerning or around cultural, political or religious landmarks, symbols or monuments. Finally, note that loud laughter as a group of Americans in public can be construed to the local as negative, disrespectful or exclusive. When in public, less attention is best.

9. **Money**
Your host will tell you if it is appropriate to give money to people who appear to be beggars. Generally speaking, it is best to avoid giving handouts on the street. And yes, heartache is very normal. Giving money directly to people can potentially cause damage on a variety of levels – Here are just a few reasons:
- The whole story isn’t always obvious to us.
- Giving money can create tension with local staff or volunteers (i.e. why did the Americans give money to John but not Tim when both need to go school?).
- It can continue to create an unhealthy dependency on visitors.
- It can take away from the local economy (i.e. bringing 100 shirts to hand out to street folks could be taking away business from local merchants). T-shirts could be a huge bonus to the Young Life ministry but it’s crucial to ask the hosts how you can serve their ministry and community.
- Please understand that your “maybe” or “I’ll get back to you” is often interpreted as “YES” – so when approached be clear and direct. If you have questions talk to your host.
10. Friendships

We want your relationships to continue after you return home! Expeditions are an investment in people. Thanks to email, Facebook, and texting, this can happen naturally with those you meet and wish to stay connected with. However here are a few words of caution:

- Please do not invite your new friends to the US. This can be a very complicated process – from funding, to applying for entry, to obtaining passports or visas through the US State Department, to the US culture shock. Our International Staff are building leaders around the world who are transforming their schools, neighborhoods, communities and nations. A visit to the US can impact that momentum and negatively influence these leaders.

- Likewise, it is difficult to make a personal visit back to the country you’ve visited outside of Young Life. But whatever the situation, we ask that you would contact the Young Life staff who oversee the various countries and ask for their blessing with any kind of visit outside of an Expedition.

Final Word

Sociological studies indicate that typically Americans are “doers” and regard time as a means to accomplish things. However, in many other cultures, “being” is much more highly regarded than “doing.” Time is often seen as a vehicle for building relationships.

Young Life Expeditions seeks to be a bridge between “doers” and “be-ers.” We desire to serve by working on community projects or helping run camps, but these are only a means to building meaningful relationships with our new friends in a new culture. We seek to have a ministry of presence and hope that ongoing partnerships will foster year after year of learning and growing together in their understanding of Jesus Christ and one another.

We urge you to check your “American Agenda” at the airport and only bring God’s Agenda. God’s agenda is always about relationships. Sometimes that means serving and sometimes that means sitting. But it always means asking yourself how you can serve Christ, your hosts and then bring your new found perspective back into your own families, homes and communities.

The information in this paper was gathered from years of experience, conversations with friends from other cultures and within our Expeditions staff and reading many articles and books that are found on our recommended book list. Our Top Ten List is by no means an exhaustive list. We’re continually asking ourselves how we can have the lightest touch when visiting another culture and are always open to new thoughts on the subject.