

# The American way of work

## To understand a hard-working nation, watch how its cultural identity plays out at the workplace.

The purpose of this article is to provide a little insight into how Americans work. It is by necessity an overgeneralization. I have glimpsed workplaces as diverse as fast-food restaurants, corporate offices, and White House meeting rooms. On the surface, these places may not seem to have a lot in common. But increasingly, corporate offices are striving to reach the efficiency of a fast-food restaurant, while the restaurant is taking instructions from the corporate office. The White House sees former executives (and this former fast-food worker) sitting in its offices. And we have recently learned that bankers and former executives sometimes have to resort to flipping burgers as well. All of these workers share a common trait with most Americans: most of us believe that we could run things better ourselves. And there are other things we have in common.

The American businessperson is relentlessly optimistic and has high performance expectations. While what appears to be unfounded optimism can be annoying to some, others know that many companies and fortunes were built on little more than a good idea, relentless drive, and intelligent optimism (see Apple). If you want to annoy an American, throw a wet blanket on all of her ideas with reasons why something won't work and express doubt every time you hit an obstacle. Yes, we know that we are a little crazy, but get on board or at least figure out a way to help us make it happen.

Expecting others to be at least as optimistic and efficient as we see ourselves, Americans value

competence, dependability, and selfless dedication to the goals of the organization. That doesn't mean that Americans expect everyone to work crazy hours every week, but when there is a short time to turn a project around, we expect everyone relevant to "roll up their sleeves" and put in the hours. Many successful American employees work more than 8 hours per day, and sometimes despise those that don't, although this is not always the case in some sectors. Because we value competence and reliability, employees that consistently fail to contribute their best efforts are routinely set aside, driven out or laid off.

Often intensely individualistic, Americans can also subjugate their egos to engage in teamwork, as achievement from their efforts may reflect well on them as a team player. Values and lessons learned from American history, icons, and lore emphasize individual performance and competence as a member of a team, with a mission at the heart of most efforts. With figures from real life and the movies like Howard Hughes, Amelia Earhart, Susan B. Anthony, Abraham Lincoln, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, John Wayne, and Daniel Boone, among others, Americans have long put rugged individualists on a pedestal. It is part of the lore of the history of America. If a person doesn't like their lot in life, they can load up their wagon and start again elsewhere, depending only on themselves to build a new life. Many of us believe that if we want something badly enough, we can will it to happen.

All in all, American culture values

the power of the individual, the team, and effort. The sense of the rugged individualist has not entirely vanished. We still use terms like "self-made man," "pull yourself up by the bootstraps," and so on. Most Americans still love a rags-to-riches story, and often equate intelligence and success with the size of their assets (and expect to be treated accordingly). Even the humblest American sees himself as a potential big-shot, and expects to be treated that way. "The customer is always right." Corporations may have killed off the personal touch in business to a large extent, but they are certainly sensitive to trends and buying patterns that can be effected when people "vote with their feet"!

What's wrong with this picture? A customer walks into a Polish security equipment supply store in Warsaw in 2000. He wants to buy about USD 110,000 worth of equipment. In order to do that, his company has given him a Citibank credit card with a limit of USD 200,000 and the option of going to the bank and withdrawing the cash equivalent. The owner of the store tells the customer that he can't take cash or credit. The customer must open a Polish zloty account and transfer the money by bank draft. The customer goes elsewhere.

### There is no "I" in "Team"

Many Americans grow up learning how to work as part of a team. Starting to play team sports like American football, soccer, lacrosse, baseball and basketball at an early age, Americans understand that a star on a losing team is a "loser" but even the

least talented player on a winning team is a "winner."

Even those that don't play sports often participate in a group activity that requires a lot of coordination like marching band. Playing an instrument well is great, but the ability of the individual to march in formation and play in tune and time is even more important.

There is a time for soloists and stars, and they can enhance a mundane performance, but more importantly, the team matters most. Many Americans I have worked with use sports, military and musical jargon like "let's huddle" [to have a meeting] or "that's a homerun" [a big success] or "let's get on the same sheet of music" [to coordinate]. We expect our teammates to watch out for each other and all pull in the same direction.

### Change that Matters

It is important for people to understand how many Americans see themselves in the roles that they play, but who is the average American? We all know that America is a very large country, but many underestimate the diversity of its workforce and the quickly changing demographics of the workplace. By some estimates, around 20 percent of the American workforce is now composed of immigrants from other cultures.

While those people have certainly integrated in many respects, the new diversity now has certain requirements. With women, minorities, and immigrants accounting for well over 50 percent of the workplace, the stereotypical white male-dominated business is a thing of the past. It is important to recognize that the person with whom one is speaking on the



Jeffrey C. Vick is the Deputy Consul General at the United States Consulate General in Krakow. Mr. Vick has twenty years of leadership and management experience in the public, private, academic, and military sectors on four continents, with an emphasis on Europe and the United States. His education includes undergraduate studies in Architecture, Technical Communications and Engineering, and graduate studies in Management Information Systems. Prior to becoming a diplomat, Mr. Vick was a management consultant with KPMG Consulting following service as an officer in the United States Army.

This article was published in "AMERICAN INVESTOR" the magazine of the American Chamber of Commerce in Poland.



phone, despite their accent, may be of any of a multitude of religions and heritages, not to mention national origins, and one should be cognizant of how that impacts the culture of a workplace. Decision-making approaches and world views are now more diverse, dynamic and creative, and teams are as likely to be led by young women as they are by an older, more traditional male.

Workplace culture is a reflection of American culture in general, but also a function of the nature of the business. That is, a company that emphasizes production and efficiency will often reflect those values at work. However, some companies differ because of leadership that models other values. Companies like Google have a reputation for maintaining a fun and creative environment; something a technology company would rarely have done in the past. Their employees also have the reputation for being insanely hard-working. Is this a trait that all technology companies share? Hardly. However, there are some commonalities that can be identified.

America has come a long way from the workplace of the Victorian age. Not to mention the 1950's. In the 1950's the boss, usually a white male, had broad hiring and firing powers. Bosses in corporations were generally the products of certain social backgrounds and were treated with much formality. It would not have been unusual to call one's immediate supervisor by his surname and title...Mr. Smith, etc. This was due to social and cultural gaps between socio-economic strata and formality that were a byproduct of differences between the educated and the working classes. Even children called their

parents "sir" and "ma'am". That was certainly the case when I was born in the 60's.

A cautionary tale. While working with a "tiger team" of consultants, I noticed an older, nattily-dressed man come into the room and observe what was going on. One of my colleagues introduced himself, and the gentleman introduced himself as "Ross Perot". My colleague, who had been on the team for a short period of time welcomed "Ross" and answered his questions. Later, at another function, we heard everyone else at the company calling the owner of EDS, "Mr. Perot".

We generally call each other by our given names at work. I called the managing partner of the consulting firm I worked for by his given name, and many of our longest standing clients as well. However, in other sectors, I also called more senior people by their titles, ranks, or using a similar formal manner. It is considered good form and professional to start with Mr. or Dr. until one's new client invites one to use their given name. This is not a hard and fast rule, though many Americans will expect you to call them by their nickname. Don't be surprised if you are doing business with a millionaire named "Bubba", "Chip", "Sugar", or "Tex".

Work relationships vary greatly from place to place and within industries in America. In some firms, people know a lot about each other's private lives. In others, very little is known. However, when dealing with an American, it is important to understand that perceived friendliness and openness is not always an invitation to ask intrusive questions into one's private life. If an American asks

"how are you", they usually expect to hear "fine" or "well". We don't necessarily want to know how you really are. Americans often smile more than others and may share a joke with you. That is also confusing to some more formal societies. One should wait until an American offers private information about their marital status, family, and other personal data before asking them any questions. In informal settings, it is generally okay for one to tell an American something personal, but don't pry if the American doesn't reciprocate.

The civil rights legislation that came out of the social movements of the 50's, 60's and 70's resulted in forced diversity of sex, race, and other factors. Over time American society has accepted that we profit more from diversity, hiring people based on their merits rather than the color of their skin or accent. The American workplace is one of the most diverse in the world and now includes people who may have certain disabilities and certainly varying belief systems that are generally left at home.

What's wrong with this picture? A man is travelling with two female colleagues, one of whom is senior to him in the organization. When asked what he does with the team, he replies "someone had to come along to take care of the ladies".

Feminism and the equal rights movements have culminated in a culture of political correctness and sexual harassment litigation. The mantra that "sexual harassment is in the eye of the beholder" has made personal relations between employees trickier. It has also made the workplace more professional and less threatening for many workers, allowing

work to be more productive and focused than ever before. But at the same time, we need to be very conscious of our words and actions directed at our co-workers, and how they might be interpreted. Be aware that your casual comments to an American, innocent though you may intend them, may set off equal opportunity warning flags.

The workplace is not the right place to pursue someone romantically. It is inevitable that one meets a potential partner at work, but avoid flirting or asking people out on dates while at work. If you want to get to know someone better, arrange lunch or coffee or other personal contact and conduct yourself professionally at work. Proceed with caution and when someone says no, accept it and move on.

### Basic of diplomacy in business relations

There are generally two definitions of diplomacy. They both apply to business in America, and are practiced by diplomats as well as successful members of the business community.

- The art or practice of conducting international relations, as in negotiating alliances, treaties, and agreements.
- Tact and skill in dealing with people.

When most people think of "diplomacy" or "being diplomatic", they think of the art of delivering a difficult message without causing offense. Indeed, this is one tool of diplomacy... the use of words and actions to communicate for a specific purpose. However, being diplomatic is not about being nice and friendly at all costs, or to no purpose.

>>



The hard truth about diplomats is that they carry out foreign policy, which is ultimately in the direct interest of their government and people. While cultural programs and people-to-people exchanges that diplomats arrange are nice and heart-warming, they are ultimately a vehicle for forming an atmosphere that makes negotiations easier and accessing information that helps diplomats craft messages that help get things done.

### **How does this apply to business?**

Each and every employee is a potential diplomat for their business. If one thinks about a business as a nation-state, with its own rules, ethics, mission, etc, the employees are not only its workforce, leadership, and constituency, but also, in some cases, its diplomats. At the highest level, when one company meets with another to do business, this bilateral action will consist of some sort of negotiation ranging from the lowest to the highest order. A customer buys an item from a price list over the internet. A customer representing another company buys a large quantity of an item and wants to negotiate price terms and other service terms. Another company enters into negotiations to be taken over, or bought by your company. All of this requires consistent one-on-one diplomacy as well as what we call “public diplomacy” or reaching out to individuals that make up the population of a country or the private customers of a business.

Every conversation and interaction that you have with a member of the public as an employee of your firm may contribute in some small way to your firm’s success or failure. Your conduct and expertise adds to or detracts from the reputation of your firm. And with business it is even more critical than with diplomacy. Governments rarely go “out of business”. Your efficiency and diplomatic skills are more directly related to the failure of your

company than a diplomat’s are to the success of her government in carrying out foreign policy. So here are some guidelines for framing ones actions; and they aren’t dissimilar to how diplomats think about their work.

### **Expect Optimism**

Optimism is infectious and while it is not welcomed by everyone, when representing your company you have to believe that what you are doing is going to work. A positive “can-do” attitude is appreciated by Americans and other nationals, who don’t have a lot of patience with “why things can’t work”.

### **First Impressions Last**

Presence – Remember that you are “on” at all times while at work and everything you say or do reflects on the company. Your physical presence and demeanor also greatly contribute to the success of the mission. Cultivate a professional demeanor that is consistent and easy for you to maintain even under stress.

### **Know Your Stuff**

Know your audience. Before you pick up the phone to call someone or go to a meeting, find out a little about the person with whom you are interacting. What time of day are you meeting with them? Do they demand punctuality (most Americans do to some extent)? What is their objective and position in the organization?

Be clear about what you want to get out of the interaction. Have a good grasp of the facts and prepare yourself for the interaction. Competitive intelligence about the organization with whom you are interacting can also help.

### **Know Yourself**

If you are at peak operating performance in the morning, conduct your people-to-people work then and save your emails for the afternoon. In America we say “fake it until you make it”. If you can’t be pleasant on the

phone with an American client, don’t call. And if you are having a bad day...maybe it is better to wait before making an important call.

- Know the mission and the message of your company as well as the image it is trying to create.
- Remember that, at the end of the day, you are dealing with other people who have motivations, agendas, and sensibilities.

It is important to listen to not only what an interlocutor is saying, but also to what they aren’t saying, and to what is behind the words. Remember that for some people, “no” is the default setting. Sometimes finding out what is behind an objection can help you overcome their reluctance and lead you to a “yes”, however, you must be sensitive to the impression you are making on people and badgering them won’t help you the next time around.

Remember that, like a diplomat, your job is pursuing the goals and interests of your company. However, along the way, you have to remember that the company, like a country, is not in the game for the short haul. Underhanded dealing, failure to deliver on promises, erodes the image of the organization over a long period of time. You will see, for example, companies that have failed because their customer service was not adequate to satisfy the public. For governments, failing to deliver on services to its citizens consistently can lead to disorder and default. In a company, it can lead to the closing of doors. When pursuing your work, like a diplomat, it is necessary to keep the long range goals of your business unit in mind. Remember that burning bridges, while sometimes personally satisfying, also closes opportunity for the future.



Jeffrey C. Vick

## **IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER**

### **Business First**

I want to get that contract signed before going to dinner with you.

### **“Time is Money”**

Deadlines are serious business, especially in a tight supply chain. Communicate Directly. Do not be offended if an American doesn’t ask how you are feeling and just wants a status report. We also appreciate brevity in the response.

### **Everyone is Special**

This is even more important as the so-called “Y” generation comes to the fore. Treat everyone with respect and include all relevant people on decisions.

### **We are Ethical**

Jokes about bribery and corruption are not appreciated. Enough said.

### **Packaging is Important**

Americans appreciate substance, but judge by appearance. If your presentation isn’t slick, polished, and professional, you will lose respect.

### **New is Better**

Well, okay, not always...but Americans are more open to new ideas than many; be careful before criticizing innovation, even if it sounds whacky.

### **Slovakia was in the Soviet Union**

No it wasn’t, but most Americans don’t know much about the world outside of America...don’t make the error of mistaking this for incompetence.

### **PPPP**

The four Ps stand for Poor Planning = Poor Performance. Americans are planners and want to see a “road map” for almost any proposed initiative involving significant resources.

### **We Complain Differently**

An American does not want to be seen as a complainer. We are very unlikely to gripe about every little thing that bugs us, rather saving them up until we have a list of grievances. Then we complain bitterly later, and not to the offender. In the hotel business, this drives management crazy, because many Americans don’t say anything until it is too late to fix a problem. We don’t like to ask for help with that pesky thermostat in our room but will complain on a comment card later. By then it is too late.

