

Potential Sticking Points: Community Cultural Awareness and Effectiveness

- Violating important community norms
- Demonstrating cultural disrespect
- Being arrogant and vocally judgmental about what has gone on before
- Failure to earn community trust and respect
- Demonstrating extreme disinterest in cultural events, practices, rituals, and ceremonies
- Failure to connect and relate to cultural groups different than their own
- Inappropriately “speaking for the community” and taking on the role of “insider” when that isn’t the case

Important Cultural Aspects and Community Resources

List the important cultural aspects that VISTAs need to know and the community resources that can help teach them:

Cultural Information:	Who? What? How?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What values, practices, relationships, and rituals are important? What people, places, resources, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors are deemed important? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the community describe, name, and define itself? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How respect is defined and practiced? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the “non-negotiables” of the community? (For every community, there are usually rules that govern one’s conduct regarding relationships and different kinds of resources that are very important to respect and not violate.) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the history of the community—social, spiritual, political, economic, diversity, major successes, major conflicts and struggles, cross-cultural experiences? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the major groups, sectors, and relationships groups have with one another? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the structure of the community? How does the community organize itself? 	

Important Cultural Aspects and Community Resources (cont.)

Cultural Information:	Who? What? How?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are the formal and informal leaders - who are viewed as “spokes-people” and the “elder voices” or keepers of wisdom and knowledge? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the traditions of service, (how helping others and “volunteering” is understood and lived out within and across this new community)? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the rhythm of a day, week, season, year, and important cycles? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who has the credibility within the community and why. How does one achieve credibility with this group? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does the community consider being its strengths, assets and legacies? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have been the significant cross-cultural, cross-group experiences for the group or community? What impact might they have on future relationships? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What has the community identified as its priority needs and challenges? 	

Entering Diverse Communities with Cultural Effectiveness

A few suggestions for VISTAs about entering a diverse community with cultural effectiveness:

- Practice listening and observing with openness and an ability to suspend assumptions and check personal lenses
- Recruit a cultural guide and coach
- Practice being affirming in the face of differences that challenge your comfort
- Commit to growing your understanding over time
- Commit to learning about the visible as well as the less visible, deeper aspects of every culture
- Understand that questions need to be posed in a culturally respectful manner
- Behave in a trustworthy manner; focus energies on building trust
- Be authentic and transparent about your intentions
- Apologize if you make a mistake
- Wait, ask permission (rather than demand)...
- Understand that negative responses you might receive might be because of prior history and prior offenses not caused by you
- Begin by focusing on the strengths and assets, rather than the challenges and problems
- Learn from your mistakes
- Steer clear of participating in perpetuating “community gossip”

Guidance for Working with a Cultural Coach or Guide

- Seek out someone who has credibility across the community
- Seek out someone who is more bi-cultural or multi-cultural so that he or she can translate and interpret things for you so that you can understand things in your terms
- Share your intentions and hopes with your coach
- Discuss with your coach the kinds of feedback that would be helpful for you to receive
- Make sure that this is a 2-way relationship, and that you are not just taking but giving consideration to your coach's needs
- Commit to regular check-in times so that you are being guided with some regularity
- Receive the feedback you are given with an open mind and open heart
- Work hard not to compromise the integrity of your coach within the community
- Share both successes and problems with your coach in a timely fashion
- Where appropriate, ask your coach to help make introductions for you