

# Immigration Information

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## **2.4 Excellent Service in a Culturally Diverse Environment \ 3.**

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(a) General. USCIS' mission is to provide service to a very culturally diverse set of applicants. Through Nation's history, the diversity of America's immigrants has brought our country valuable skills, talents, creativity. With this in mind, this section will:

- Discuss the ways in which applicants are diverse.
- Define culture.
- Discuss the ways that culture can impact customer service.
- Discuss the ways that culture can impact nonverbal and verbal communication.
- How are applicants diverse?

Just like American citizens, USCIS applicants are very diverse. Applicants can differ in the following w

- Race
- Geographic origin
- Gender
- Religion
- Language
- Physical characteristics
- Disabilities
- Sexual orientation
- Economic status
- Family background
- Educational background
- Professional background
- Lifestyle

(b) What Is Culture? These previously listed dimensions of diversity will affect an individual's cultural n This cultural make-up is based on a set of assumptions, values, and beliefs, often shared by a particu people, which affect their perception of the world and define what is acceptable and unacceptable beh individuals' cultural make-up is simultaneously shaped by several different elements, such as ethnicity religion, and economic status.\ 4

Collectively, the following cultural assumptions and beliefs affect many aspects of an individual's life.

(1) Notions of Appropriate and Inappropriate Behavior and Etiquette. For example:

- Polite and impolite behavior
- Courteous and rude personal greetings
- Personal displays of respect and disrespect

- Appropriate and inappropriate dress
- Appropriate and inappropriate touch

(2) Communication Styles. For example:

- The meaning of nonverbal communication such as hand gestures and facial expressions.
- The meaning of verbal communication such as language choice and acceptable and unacceptable for discussion.

(3) Beliefs and Values. For example:

- Religious beliefs
- Political beliefs
- Personal morality
- Individual versus group responsibilities

(4) Human Relations. For example:

- How to interact with a person in a position of authority
- To whom it is appropriate/inappropriate to speak
- The hierarchy in social or business interactions
- The roles of men and women and how they should behave
- The social class system
- The relationships and obligations between parents, children, family members, and friends<sup>5</sup>

(c) What Role Does Culture Play in Customer Service? You will interact with people of diverse cultural backgrounds every day. While you may not know about every element of an applicant's culture, each should receive the same courteous, professional, and knowledgeable service.

Some helpful hints to ensure you are sensitive to cultural difference include the following:

- Treat every customer courteously, professionally, and knowledgeably.
- Never make any derogatory comments about an applicant's culture.
- Err on the side of formality. Most cultural groups value formality, and it will demonstrate respect on the applicant.
- Make an effort to pronounce names and titles correctly. If you are not sure about proper pronunciation, ask the applicant.
- Check your assumptions. Your assumptions about an applicant's culture may be incorrect and could lead to incorrect beliefs about the applicant. For example:
  - Don't assume that all applicants have the same set of cultural expectations as you,
  - Don't assume that cultural difference is a sign of cultural deficiency,
  - Don't assume that applicants from a certain culture will behave the same way, or share the same cultural expectations as other individuals from that culture.

Ensure that your review of the application and your decisions are based entirely on an applicant's legal rights for the benefit being sought, rather than issues such as an applicant's cultural assumptions and beliefs, personal appearance or your own personal cultural values.

Remember that while every applicant must be treated respectfully, an applicant's cultural assumptions do not override the law, regulations, agency policy and precedent decisions that govern the benefit being sought. For example, an applicant must answer your questions regarding eligibility requirements even if he or she

from a culture where it would be seen as inappropriate to discuss personal matters with a member of the same gender.

Make efforts to learn about the cultures of the people with whom you will interact.

(d) Cultural Diversity and Miscommunication. Cultural diversity can be the source of miscommunication in social interactions. Non-verbal communication (facial expressions and physical gestures) and verbal communication (tone of voice and choice of language) can differ greatly between cultures and can be the source of misinterpretation when individuals from different cultures are communicating.

(e) Nonverbal and Verbal Communication in a Diverse Environment. Nonverbal communication, which is the basis for important subconscious judgments about other people, includes eye contact, body language, gestures, facial expressions, and personal space. Nonverbal communication can cause miscommunication during your interaction with an applicant.

Like nonverbal communication, verbal communication styles can differ across cultures and cause misunderstanding. Verbal communication includes:

- Which specific language we use,
- What is acceptable and unacceptable to talk about,
- How much one should say,
- How people should greet each other,
- With whom it is acceptable to speak, and
- How to express agreement and disagreement in acceptable ways.

Verbal styles can differ across cultures in many ways. For example, in some cultures, "good" verbal communication requires speaking clearly and directly about the subject at hand. Speaking indirectly about the subject could be seen as a sign that individuals are being untruthful. In contrast, in some other cultures, speaking in a direct manner would be seen as overly harsh and impolite. To further complicate verbal communication, some applicants will not speak English with the same degree of proficiency as a native-born speaker.

You can take the following steps to reduce misunderstanding when communicating (verbally and non-verbally) with applicants:

(1) Stop and Think Before You Judge. Given that nonverbal and verbal communication styles can differ across cultures, do not judge an applicant simply based on his or her nonverbal or verbal communication style. For example, you might assume that an applicant who does not look you in the eye when speaking is being untruthful. However, that applicant may not be looking at you directly in the eye because in that applicant's culture, it would be seen as disrespectful. Moreover, this fact doesn't mean that the applicant cannot meet the eligibility requirements based on the information in the file and through verbal responses to your questions. Or, you may be interviewing an applicant whose English is not as proficient as yours; this doesn't necessarily mean that the applicant isn't intelligent or that the applicant cannot establish that he or she meets all the eligibility requirements.

Regardless of the applicant's nonverbal communication style, *your* nonverbal and verbal communication should remain courteous and professional. You will encounter many different nonverbal and verbal communication styles during your career as an adjudicator. Rather than trying to adapt your nonverbal or verbal style to fit the applicant's style or treating an applicant rudely because he or she doesn't have the same nonverbal or verbal communication style as you, follow the suggestions in this chapter for maintaining a courteous and professional demeanor.

(2) Be Patient. The entire application process can be stressful and confusing for some applicants,

they are not native-born English speakers. They may have questions or be unsure about important parts of the process. You should be willing to explain processes or terms applicants may not understand.

(3) Communicate Clearly at the Applicant's Comprehension Level. Not all applicants will be able to understand English at the same level as a native-born speaker. Consequently, you should adapt your tone, volume, and vocabulary so that the applicant has the best possible opportunity to establish that she meets the requirements for the benefit being sought. This means that, if necessary, you should

- Avoid using USCIS jargon or abbreviations;
- Speak slower than normal;
- Make every effort to speak very clearly;
- Understand that some American accents may be difficult for an applicant to understand;
- Check for comprehension, and if the applicant doesn't understand you at first, try rewording the questions;
- Use proper English, rather than slang or acronyms;
- Tailor your vocabulary to meet the applicant's level of understanding;
- Enunciate each word to prevent your words from running together; and
- Allow for pauses between your sentences or after your questions for mental translations.

(f) Conclusion: Stay Focused. You will experience numerous examples of cultural diversity during your interview as an adjudicator. Regardless of the cultural background of the applicant, your two primary goals should be the same:

- Providing courteous, professional and knowledgeable service to all applicants.
- Focusing your interview on whether the applicant meets the legal requirements for the benefits being sought.

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