

SESSION 10: ADAPTING TO PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, we will have:

1. **Defined** culture and **identified** differences in cultural behaviors and thinking; (30)
2. **Named** reasons why one might consider adapting to other cultures; (20)
3. **Defined** and **practiced** professional culture through roleplays; (20)
4. **Summarized** roleplays by defining code-switching and **described** the professional goal of code-switching; (15)
5. **Assessed** our understanding of important aspects of professional culture; (20 min)
6. **Created** a list of important practices in professional culture; (10) and
7. **Committed** to practice code-switching and important facets of professional culture during this course.(5)

Materials Needed:

- Participant Guides
- Flipchart paper/Markers
- Small markers for each table
- Post-it Note Slips (green and pink)
- Card sets for each table (5A)

Preparation Needed:

- Create flipcharts: *What is Culture?, Cultural Distinctions, Perception is Reality, Code-Switching, closing commitment*
- Create nametags: *Banker, Customer, Grandma, Uncle, Aunt*
- Bring small prize for winning actors (3D)
- Prepare foreign language phrase (4A)

Time

120 minutes

Task 1: Defined culture and identified differences in cultural behaviors and thinking (30 minutes)

1A: Today, we're going to discuss the idea of culture. Examine this one-sentence definition of culture on the flipchart. What might you add?

Culture: a set of behaviors and/or values that are common between a group of people.

1B: Listen to an example of cultural difference in Martin and Alex's experiences. They became good friends last year, but they are from different neighborhoods, races, and income levels.

Note some cultural differences they learned by experience when becoming friends. Feel free to **laugh** aloud or **share** your reactions after I read each one.

[Adapt these to your local context, using realistic examples you have encountered in working with your target group. If they are humorous in a non-offensive way, so much the better!]

Martin and Alex: Cultural Differences

Language Use: In Martin’s culture, if someone says “a minute” they mean approximately 60 seconds. In Alex’s neighborhood, a minute means a long time. For example, “I haven’t seen him in a minute” could mean several weeks; or “I’ll be there in a minute” could mean “I’ll be there sometime later, but not right now. At first, this caused numerous misunderstandings and offenses, especially when Martin waited for long amounts of time and felt like Alex was blowing him off or didn’t respect his time.

Rules for Dress: In Martin’s culture, if someone says to “dress casual” it means you can wear shorts, t-shirt, and sandals. In Alex’s culture, casual usually means slacks and a button down. This caused embarrassment and feeling out of place when Martin showed up and was the only one wearing shorts and flip flops!

Phone Communication: In Martin’s culture, if someone hangs up without saying “bye” then they likely assume the other person is angry or being impatient with them. In Alex’s culture, saying bye on the phone means that you might never speak to them again. Martin learned not to get offended – at first, he thought Alex was getting an attitude with him!

Social Behavior: In Martin’s culture, hosting a BBQ is an excuse for people to hang out together. Guests often contribute something like a side or drinks and will be there for a couple hours. In Alex’s culture, a BBQ is an excuse to be generous with others. Residents like cooking a very large amount of food in order to give it away to their neighbors. Guests don’t contribute at all and usually don’t stay long. Rather they come for a few minutes and make a to-go plate. When Alex threw a BBQ, he was hurt when Martin and his friends showed up, came to get plates of food, and left!

1C: Call to mind a humorous story where you or someone you know totally misunderstood somebody because they were from a different culture, or someone totally misunderstood you because they were from a different culture. **Form** groups of 3 and **tell** a few stories.

After 3 minutes, we’ll **hear** several stories that are particularly funny or interesting.

1D: Now that we’ve defined culture, let’s **discuss** different ways cultural groups can be divided. Let’s **brainstorm** as many examples of different cultural groups as you can. For example, one distinction could be between age groups—elderly and teenage people. Another example could be racial categories (black, white, Hispanic, etc). Come and **list** your examples on the flipchart entitled *Cultural Distinctions*.

[Example could include religion, denomination, region, race, neighborhood, income level, hobbies]

1E: Listen as I assign each table group one of these categories: age, geographic region, income level, religious beliefs, race. At your table, **identify** at least 2 different groups inside your category. For example, age: elderly and teenager. **Nominate** a scribe at your table to **write down** as many differences that you can identify between the groups as possible. Please be detailed but respectful.

After several minutes, we’ll **hear** from each group.

[Have fun with the large group discussion. If the instructor represents the minority culture in the room this is a good opportunity to allow the class to do most of the educating. Consider inviting participants to give you a homework assignment based on helping the instructor learn and/or experience some aspect of the neighborhood culture.]

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We have just identified differences between these various cultural groups. We are going to call these differences hidden rules. While these rules are obvious to everyone inside the culture, oftentimes they have to be learned by outsiders.

1F: How might the differences we discussed have the potential to cause misunderstanding, frustration or confusion between the groups if they remain hidden? What would happen when an outsider comes into a new culture, not knowing some of the hidden rules?

Share some examples using the cultural groups we've just discussed.

Those are some great examples.

Task 2: Named reasons why one might consider adapting to other cultures (20 minutes)

Hidden rules can often create misunderstandings and conflicts between the outsider and the culture they come into.

2A: Consider: what are reasons we might learn to adapt to other cultures when we are entering them? **Discuss** this with your neighbor for 2 minutes. Then we'll **hear** from a few of you.

[One dominant way of thinking in the culture you are working with might be that it is 'fake' to adapt to other cultures. This is why the lesson takes a long time to work through this principle. If you are having trouble establishing this principle, help participants see that they already adapt when they walk in church, or into their grandmother's house. i.e. "Can't sag in grandma's place."]

Thanks for this discussion. At least some of the time, we should consider adapting to another person's culture.

2B: Let's **examine** this principle in I Corinthians about a man named Paul. Paul was a missionary, which meant his job was to go into new cultures that had never heard about Jesus and teach them what Jesus taught, and how to live in the new ways of His kingdom. As we listen to the passage, **think about** why Paul might have adapted to the local culture. Can a volunteer please **read** the paraphrase in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22?

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—

whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. (The Message)

- After reading this, why might Paul have adapted to each of these different cultures? For example, why did he adapt to the religious people? Let's **hear** your ideas.

Paul adapted to other cultures to accomplish his mission of communicating the gospel of the kingdom of God. The goal was to win their respect so that he could best accomplish his work. Also, note that Paul doesn't say he *has* to do this. He *chooses* to do this because it will help him achieve his goal for God. This passage is ultimately about the way Christians should live and work among different cultures, but you don't need to be a Christian to apply this principle to the way that you do your job. You just need to be smart.

2C: Share aloud: What might happen if Paul didn't win peoples' respect before trying to teach them?

Thanks for sharing. While some of the stories we have shared may be humorous, cultural misunderstanding can often be very serious. The reason we are taking the time to talk about culture is because many people remain unemployed or underemployed because employers don't take them seriously as professionals.

2D: Read the summary of a nation-wide survey in your notes called *Are They Really Ready to Work?* The survey was sent out to hundreds of employers in the US, asking them the question: what qualities do you look for most in making hiring or promotional decisions? **Skim** the list and **call out** the number 1 answer that employers gave.

Top Five Most Important Skills⁶

1. Professionalism
2. Teamwork
3. Oral Communication (speaking and listening skills)
4. Ethics & Social Responsibility (honest and trustworthy)
5. Reading Comprehension

Professionalism is a kind of culture that is common between most managers, but may not be shared with lower-level employees. This culture has its own rules and ways of thinking. Most of the time, cultural differences aren't about what's right and wrong, but rather what the cultural "hidden rules". For instance, God probably doesn't care that much about ties, but if you work at a bank, it's part of the culture that you wear one! God does care about work, so if we work at a bank, we need to figure out how to adapt to these hidden rules.

⁶ Derived from *Key Findings: Are They Really Ready to Work?* <http://www.p21.org/>

A lot of times, employees are stuck in an entry-level or temporary positions because they have not adapted to professional culture.

2E: **Listen** to Devon’s story. **Note** his struggles and realizations in adapting to professional culture.

Devon Considers Professional Culture

Devon works in a manufacturing company as a forklift driver. He’s been there 3 years, and is a good worker who is generally respected by his colleagues. However, he has been unable to move up to a higher position. He has been repeatedly turned down for a promotion to an office manager. He has applied 3 times, but keeps getting rejected—even though he’s the only one in the company who is qualified for the position! His boss, Chase, told him it was because the managers didn't think he was “office material.”

Devon took this as completely racist, and complained to his friend Tabitha. Tabitha, who is a manager at a clothing store in the mall, told him: “Well, that might play a role in it, but either way, look at it like this: as a forklift driver, it doesn’t matter how you talk or dress, but in an office, you would interact with different types of people in a professional culture. How you dress and talk matters a lot.”

Devon thought about what she said for a few days. At first, he didn’t agree with Tabitha. But now, he is beginning to think she is right—he doesn’t dress and talk the part for an office job, so his employers probably can’t see him in that role. He knows he could change these things about himself. He’s always said: “Well, I'd dress like this and do like that if I were getting paid for that position. But since I'm working in the back, they don’t care how we dress and talk.” He is beginning to think that part of the problem is that his bosses can't picture him in any different role – which is why he struggles to get a promotion.

- What do you think is the main point of this story and conversation about professional culture?

2F: If we had to **summarize** the main point, it might be: in order to succeed in my work (and thus to make more money!) we must win the respect of employers by adapting to professional culture.

Often times we hear that to play by someone else’s rules is *bougie* or *selling out*. But the real question is: are you willing to adapt to employer’s expectations to achieve your dreams or not? Some of us are inevitably not ready, but **consider** this question: What If I told you I would give you \$4,300 dollars and all you had to do in exchange is tuck in your shirt, smile and make eye contact when you talk to anyone at work for 1 year? Would you make those three changes?

Share your responses in the large group.

This is exactly what adapting to professional culture can help you to do. In our estimation, the average difference in 1 year’s salary for a temp employee versus a full-time employee is \$4,300⁷. The rewards are worth it, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy!

⁷ Average low-income salary in the US (2013) x .25 <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/13poverty.cfm>, <http://www.propublica.org/article/the-expendables-how-the-temps-who-power-corporate-giants-are-getting-crushed>

Task 3: Define and practice professional culture through roleplays (20 minutes)

3A: Let's further **consider** and **practice** what adapting to professional culture might look like. Can I get two volunteers to act out a little scenario: a banker, and an important customer?

Now, one of you will play the banker and the other an important customer. Sit together in these chairs in the front. Pretend this is a high-dollar business setting.

In this first scene, **interact** at the bank office, using your most professional culture acting skills. **Discuss** your most recent investments together in the bank and your future plans for the money. Also, **mention** your family, too, but using professional culture.

Great depiction. Let's **applaud** our actors!

3B: Now, for the second scene, **pretend** it's 5:00 pm and the banker has to rush back to his grandma's house for a family reunion. In this scene, I'll need 3 family members. I need two aunts and/or uncles, and a grandmother. Now, in this second scene, the banker will talk to family members around the grill about a recent sports game or family news. But, the banker will stay in his/her bank culture, while the other participants remain in their informal family culture. Let's **observe** the interaction. Now remember, it isn't that people at grandma's house are doing anything wrong, they're just in their home culture rather than the professional bank culture.

Let's **give** them big round of applause!

3C: Debrief: How did Grandma and these other family members respond to their banker family member?

[If necessary, draw out that he may be ostracized, be called bougie, fake, or "above his raisings." Make sure the idea that he won't thrive in his family if he acts this way comes out loud and clear.]

Great observations and acting, everyone. We discussed practical examples of the consequences of not adapting to professional culture—and now we've seen that there are similar consequences of not adapting back into our informal family culture.

I want to reward our actors for their participation. So I'm going to make them the judges for our next task.

3D: All of the rest of you, **work** at your tables to **create** a brief 1 minute skit demonstrating a similar situation where one culture is appropriate for one setting, but that if you stay in that culture when you go into another, it could get you in trouble.

Avoid having illegal or rude elements in your skit—the point of adapting to the work place culture isn't changing from bad to good behavior, but just situations where what's appropriate in one culture and inappropriate in another. For instance, you need to show respect to grandma and you need to show respect to your boss. But the way you communicate that respect is

different based on the two different cultures. Focus your skit on how to communicate a message, like care or respect, in 2 different cultural settings.

Take 5 minutes to prepare and then we'll **watch** and **applaud** each group. The judges will award a small prize to the group that best depicts switching between different cultures.

Task 4: Summarize roleplays by defining code-switching and describe the professional goal of code-switching (15 minutes)

Thank you all for making these concepts come alive. The whole concept of moving back and forth between cultures is called *code-switching*. Code-switching is a skill that you can develop to move back and forth between professional culture and informal family culture.

The goal of code-switching is not to be fake, or reject “where we came from.” The goal is to make sure we are sending the messages we desire about ourselves to those around us. We’re trying to speak in the language that those around us understand.

4A: Listen to a practical example of what this feels like. [*Facilitator to speak a few phrases of a foreign language to the class about work*]. **Call out** words that describe how you might feel if I suddenly began speaking to you in this language for the rest of the class period.

If we fail to code-switch, this is like speaking a foreign language to people who only speak English.

4B: As an example, let's **discuss** arriving on time.

- If your grandma invites you to a barbeque at 7, what time do you show up to communicate respect?
- If your employer asks you to be at work tomorrow at 7, what time do you need to show up to communicate respect?

Communicating respect is different for different cultures. The important thing is for your respect to be communicated in a way that it will be clearly understood.

4C: Examine this quote written on the chart: *Perception is Reality*. Let's **discuss** these questions, one at a time:

- How might this apply to code-switching?
- If we dress, speak, and behave like we are at our family reunion at our job, what might our boss' perception of us become? Based on this, how will he treat us?
- What “label” might our boss put on us if we:
 - Sag our pants and never tuck our shirts in?
 - Use mild profanity in front of customers and other employees?
 - Show up late or cut out early regularly from work?

Thanks for sharing your thoughts. It is possible that these labels are totally false—that somebody might sag their pants but be very honest and hard working, or that someone who uses mild

profanity really respects others. But if that person doesn't code switch, the boss will get a negative perception even if the person had great character. Refusing to code-switch means that you will either fail in a professional setting or in a private setting. If you choose to be professional all of the time, your family and friends will feel that they cannot relate to you. If you choose to be casual all of the time, your boss and co-workers will not develop respect for you as a professional.

Task 5: Assess our understanding of important aspects of professional culture (20 minutes)

5A: Let's **evaluate** what we know about professional culture. I will pass out these A, B, C, D and True/False cards to each table. Together, we'll take the quiz in your notes. After I ask each question, your table will have 15 seconds to **agree** and **hold up** the letter which best describes your collective response.

After each question, we'll briefly **discuss** the message that a person in professional culture might receive from the various actions. We'll **consider:** what potential labels might a boss place on somebody if they see unprofessional behavior because of a failure to code-switch?

Professional Culture Pop Quiz

1. Clothing
 - a. I can wear my clothes however I want as long as I am wearing my uniform
 - b. My clothing has nothing to do with how I work
 - c. I should dress like all my co-workers to fit in
 - d. I should dress like my boss to stand out
2. Jewelry
 - a. I can wear whatever I want
 - b. My jewelry should just match the color of my clothes
 - c. My jewelry should be small so that it does not attract attention
 - d. My jewelry should attract attention
3. If the bus is running late I should
 - a. Sprint the whole way to work
 - b. Call my manager the moment I know I'm going to be late
 - c. I should just miss work because I'm going to get a point for being late anyway
 - d. Catch the next bus and assume that everyone will know what happened
4. I can look professional in a shirt that says "Your boyfriend wants me."
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. If my boss doesn't answer the phone I should
 - a. Expect them to call me back because they have my number on caller ID
 - b. Keep calling every 30 seconds until they answer their phone
 - c. Leave a voicemail with my name, number and the reason I called
 - d. Do nothing because I tried calling
6. Spitting in the parking lot could keep me from getting hired or getting promoted
 - a. True
 - b. False
7. If I have an appointment (doctor, court, etc.) and need to miss work
 - a. I should request an excused absence as soon as I know date and time of the appointment
 - b. I should call in a few hours before the appointment
 - c. Bring in paper work to my boss after the appointment to show them why I missed work
 - d. I should talk with my boss about the appointment as soon as its scheduled and ask if there's another shift I can work to make up those hours, instead of using my excused absence.
8. If my boss hits on me
 - a. I should go along with it because they may be able to get me promoted
 - b. I should put him in his place unless I like him
 - c. I should only mess with him away from work
 - d. I should report the conversation to Human Resources
9. If my personal life is brought up on the job
 - a. I should confront the person about it and ask them not to talk about it at work
 - b. I should make my supervisor aware of what's going on

- c. I should ignore it
 - d. I should bring up their personal business to teach them a lesson
10. My voicemail message could keep me from getting hired
- a. True
 - b. False
11. Facebook
- a. It's OK to talk about my co-workers on Facebook as long as it's not on the job
 - b. Only God can judge me so I can put whatever I want on Facebook
 - c. I should consider that Facebook will likely open my personal life up to my co-workers and/or boss; therefore, I should control what I put on it
 - d. Facebook has nothing to do with my career so I shouldn't even think about it
12. Appearance (sagging)
- a. Sagging is just a style so I can do it wherever I want, even on the job
 - b. Sagging is morally wrong and it's never OK
 - c. Sagging is not a good idea in a school or work setting because it may cause people not to take me seriously
 - d. The way I wear my pants is irrelevant to my job
13. Networking
- a. When I am meeting professionals I should introduce myself by my nickname
 - b. When I am meeting professionals I should introduce myself by my real name
14. Friendliness
- a. I should not speak to anyone on the job because I'm here to work, not make friends
 - b. I should acknowledge everyone I see
 - c. Only acknowledge the people I know
 - d. Only acknowledge my boss
15. Employers make hiring decisions based on how quickly or slowly people walk.
- a. True
 - b. False
16. If my paycheck is shorter than its supposed to be I should
- a. Demand the rest of the money immediately because I have been mistreated
 - b. Assume there's been a mistake and make an appointment to talk to my employer
 - c. Tell everyone I know that the employer is trying to get over on their employees
 - d. Ignore the issue and hope it doesn't happen again
17. I can look professional in a shirt with a marijuana leaf on it
- a. True
 - b. False
18. It is important to pick the best clothes that I normally go to the club in for interviews or at my job, because appearance is an important part of being on the job.
- a. True
 - b. False
19. Throwing my cigarette but on the parking lot could keep me from getting hired or promoted
- a. True
 - b. False

20. Certain kinds of music on my call back tone could keep me from getting hired
- True
 - False
21. Facial expressions
- Don't matter as long as I get my work done
 - Should be used to show people what's on my mind
 - Should be used to show people that I am positive and have a good attitude
 - None of the above
22. In an interview women should
- Look as attractive as possible
 - Look as neatly as possible and dress according to the job they are applying for
 - Long eyelashes, fingernails, 6 inch heels are a bonus
 - Long eyelashes, fingernails, 6 inch heels are a negative
 - A and C
 - B and D
 - None of the above
23. Which of the following options is the best option for someone applying for an entry level position in a warehouse?
- A three piece suit
 - A shirt with a collar un-tucked with khakis or jeans
 - A shirt with a collar tucked in to khakis or jeans
 - Whatever makes them feel the most comfortable
24. I should
- Tuck in my shirt only if I'm required to
 - Tuck in my shirt if my boss tucks in their shirt
 - It doesn't matter the way I wear my shirt
 - Wear my shirt the way most of my co-workers wear their shirts
25. The way I talk to or about the opposite sex could keep me from getting hired or promoted
- True
 - False
26. It doesn't matter what my co-workers think of me at all as long as I get my work done
- True
 - False
27. If my boss doesn't understand me when I speak
- We're just different and it doesn't matter
 - I should adjust the way I talk to make sure they understand me
 - It could be the difference between me staying in the entry level position or getting promoted to another position
 - B and C
28. My boss has no right discipline me for what happens off the clock or outside of the building
- True
 - False

Task 6: Create a list of the important practices in professional culture (10 minutes)

6A: Let's **summarize** our discussion of this quiz. Take 5 minutes at your table and **write out** your top 5 tips on professional culture.

Afterwards, each table will quickly **present** their ideas. I will also **create** my own list.

[Walk around as the groups do this task. Then create your own list incorporating whatever ideas from the list below are NOT covered.]

- ✓ **Appearance:** Simple is best. Clothing should not bring much attention to ourselves, including shoes, shirt, pants, jewelry, and tattoos.
- ✓ **Body language/Facial expressions:** Always make eye contact and reserve your judgments
- ✓ **Pace:** Walk briskly, not hurried, but not too slow.
- ✓ **Friendliness:** Go out of your way to greet each colleague and boss in the morning; make personal small talk when first encountering co-workers.
- ✓ **Communication:** Speak professionally and directly to your boss when in conflict, after making a mistake, when late for work, when personal issues interfere with work.
- ✓ **Conversation Topics:** Money, sex, and religion are the most taboo. If you face sexual harassment, follow HR policies.
- ✓ **Speech:** Speak at the right volume. Don't use slang or curse words. Use clear, simple language - employers may pretend to understand when they don't.

6B: Let's **hear** from each group, and then I will also **present** my own. We'll **write** your ideas on the flipchart entitled *Code-switching*.

6C: At your tables, **brainstorm** and **name** situations where or when you think it is important to code-switch into professional culture.

After 2 minutes, we'll **share** our responses in the large group.

This is a great list. Maybe we could summarize it this way: we should switch into professional culture anytime we are in a place or around people who could help us get a job, or help us get a better job than the one we have. This includes all professional settings, whether at work or at school.

Task 7: Commit to practice code-switching and important facets of professional culture during this course (5 minutes)

We have been talking about why it is crucial to code-switch into professional culture. If it's important to practice code-switching in any setting where there are people who can help us get a job or get a better job, then we should start now! This *Work Life* course is one of those places. From now on, let's practice code-switching when we come onto the property. Remember that it's not just *what* you know, but also *who* you know. This is one of the best places to build a

professional network because people from dozens of different businesses come here to visit and volunteer. If they have the perception that we are unprofessional, then they will probably not be willing to help us get jobs. It's easy to say that we have to adapt to professional culture, but it's a whole other thing to actually make the switch.

7A: Together, let's **practice** code-switching when we're interacting with staff or volunteers, even outside of this class! Let's **challenge** ourselves to adapt to the rules of professional culture here – in all of these areas that we've noted on the flipchart entitled *Code-switching*.

Together, let's **sign** the flipchart, committing to adapt to professional culture and code-switch while on the property of our church/organization. There's no pressure to commit – only if you are serious about taking practical steps toward building new skills and a career.

Together, we commit to put our ideas into action. We will adapt to professional culture by code-switching while attending the *Work Life* course.

To help us do this, from now on we're going to be recognizing professionalism and *un*professionalism in this class. If the facilitators or even one of you observes professionalism from somebody, let's hand them one of these green slips, as a recognition that this is the sort of message that will lead to a promotion and more money. On the other hand, if I observe unprofessionalism, I will pass out pink slips - a recognition that this is the sort of message that might get you fired! Only the facilitator can give out pink slips.

We'll try to keep this fun, but as part of a commitment to make changes for our careers, let's work hard to apply these ideas through the rest of class.

7B: Let's **close** together in prayer asking for God's wisdom in developing our professional skills.