

BECOMING A CULTURAL INSIDER

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 1225 California Avenue, Bakersfield, CA 93304
 (661) 861-1043 — info@aitusa.org

When was the last time you felt like an "outsider"? When have you wanted to be part of a new group, but weren't accepted into the inner circle? You probably experienced the feeling of being an outsider as a child or a teenager, especially if you moved to a new school where the relationships were already developed, and the friendship lines were already drawn. Most of us hated the feelings that accompanied that situation. We felt lonely, fearful, and disapproved by the people we wanted to accept us - our peers. Those were often awkward and difficult days.

Now that you have moved overseas, those feelings are on their way back into your life. The question is not if you will feel this way - You Will! Rather, the question is will you do what's necessary to pass through the outsider stage as quickly as possible? If the answer is yes, you are taking one more important step in your cross-cultural adjustment.

Robert Kohls said it well, "You're not the first American to leave our shores to try your hand at living in another country. Thousands have gone before and set the stage for your arrival.... Yes, your way has been paved with bad impressions!" The impressions left by others are one reason you feel at times very much like an outsider. You will survive and have an impact in your ministry as you choose to take the offensive in your learning.

WHAT DOES BEING AN INSIDER MEAN?

What we are talking about here is a depth of relationship and acceptance beyond a "cliche" or surface level. Becoming an insider is all about knowing the person or persons, from the inside out - knowing their hearts, their way of thinking (whether or not you agree), their culture and language. It's at this point that you can begin to have an influence on them, for they will actually allow you to do so.

Think about the last time you were on the inside of a group. What were some of the dynamics that got you to that position? Undoubtedly, it took time. You made some initial friendships, developed them and saw those begin to expand to the rest of the group. Those close relationships helped to guide you through the maze of people and ideas that that particular group represented. That person or persons was in effect acting as your cultural guide. You earned the trust of the group over time, and the members began to "talk shop" more and more with you. At this point, you could begin to influence them with your ideas as well.

What is involved ?

Lingenfelter and Mayers write that in order to become what they call a cultural insider, it is important to know that, "(C)ross-cultural ministry is to be understood as any ministry in which one interacts with people who have grown up learning values and lifestyle patterns that are different than ones own (p. 11)...the challenge is to accept differences in others and even to be multi-cultural, that is, to be able to walk from our own culture into the culture of others and to

live that way rather than our own (p. 120)...We must accept the host culture as a valid, albeit imperfect way of life (p. 120)."

So it's important to bear in mind that:

1. Lifestyle and values differ from culture to culture.
2. We must accept the differences that do not contradict God's ways and learn to walk the way the people walk.
3. Understand that their way of life is valid. It may be imperfect, but that does not make it wrong.

Other concepts to consider?

1. **Becoming an insider takes time.** Ted Ward writes, The "get ahead" person (or an overly aggressive Campus Crusader) is especially apt to be impatient. Being able to accept the time it takes to think and act is basic. Learning to be more patient with oneself helps too." (p. 133) We are often in far too much of a hurry. Yes, God has called you overseas to win people to Christ, but He wants you to do it correctly. Doing anything less than taking the time to become a cultural insider before you jump off into "ministry" is a mistake that will cost you down the road. You may not see the benefits right away, but as you work hard at these principles will you see fruit that lasts and reproduces long after you are gone.
2. **It's not a list of things to do, but rather a matter of relationships.** If you are a highly driven and task oriented person, you are likely to face more frustration than those who concentrate on the more time consuming tasks of relationship building. People are important. Take the time to develop long lasting relationships. They will pay many rich dividends. In doing so your ministry will excel in quality and quantity.
3. **It is a matter of penetration, rather than complete transformation.** It has been said that anyone not willing to give up being an American for a time and begin learning as a child is not ready for the challenge of cross-cultural ministry. To balance that important truth, remember that you will always be American to varying degrees. Your language skills (except in a few rare cases) will always give you away as a foreigner. Realize this, and do the best you can. Your position as an American/foreigner is often a novel and positive thing in the eyes of nationals. Take advantage of your position! Over time, you will become amazingly more like your new culture, but don't get hung up on the thought that you must be exactly like them in order to impact them. Keep in mind as well, that you must give up your "rights" as an American for now because you are in a foreign land learning their ways.
4. **It is best accomplished by taking the role of a Learner/Servant.** Choose to be a student of the customs and ways of the people you want to reach, and a servant to

meet their needs, rather than a ministry hotshot who has come to set them free from their backward lifestyle. Perhaps that sounds harsh, but the hotshot mind-set can grow if we are not guarding against it. We have the greatest news ever announced to man, but it will not be accepted if it is given in a paternal, or imperialistic fashion. Part of the reason that we fall into a wrong mind set in approaching the people is put forth by Donald Larson, "(B)eing a foreigner is a new and at least for a time, uncomfortable, even life threatening experience. It can produce a persistent sense of insecurity vibrating just below the threshold of consciousness - something like a long term low grade infection, not seriously disruptive but annoyingly debilitating." So what do we do when we begin feeling this emotional and cultural discomfort? We turn on the speed in the area we are most comfortable with - ministry! If we are not cautious, we will do that ministry without appropriate sensitivity and reliance on the Holy Spirit. We see people as targets, hitting them fast, hard, and relentlessly with the truth of the Gospel, not giving them time to think through the issues. Doing that might make you feel like you feel more comfortable, but it won't communicate the love of Christ to a national with a very different value and worldview framework.

Cultural anthropological studies have shown that nationals tend to view their encounters with missionaries in one of three ways. 1. *School House* - The national is the learner and the missionary the teacher. 2. *Market Place* - the national is the buyer and the missionary the seller. 3. *Court Room* - the missionary is the accuser and the national is the accused. These are not effective communication models.

To communicate effectively, the missionary must choose to be a learner/servant to the people they want to reach, despite the fact that it may initially require a slower pace of evangelism and discipleship. Lingenfelter says it well, "Incarnational ministry seems to imply the entering into the culture as a complete learner - as a child - and giving yourself wholly to the task of grasping what the people are all about, like Jesus did by being incarnated as man. This means undergoing drastic personal reorientation." (p. 23)

Some people mistakenly think that once they have finally mastered the language they have also learned the culture. As important as language learning is (and that can not be emphasized enough!) some cultural anthropologists feel that knowing the language is only 10% of knowing the culture.

CONCLUSION

Becoming an insider begins with a proper mind set. It continues with choices to do whatever it takes to be culturally astute and in tune with the minds and hearts of the people. It's choosing to be patient, knowing that cultural understanding will take time and remembering that God has given you the time you need to learn the culture. Being a cultural insider means focusing more strongly on the people than on the task. God could finish the task in the flash of a moment in any number of ways if that were His main consideration. But He chooses you and me to love His creation into His Kingdom, and that takes time! Being an insider does not mean that you will be totally transformed into a cultural Yugoslav, Burmese, or a Nigerian. It does mean that you are able to penetrate another culture and make an impact. It's knowing that to win the hearts of a

people, I must approach them as a Learner/Servant.

Your task is not impossible. It is possible in the power of God's Spirit and with some cultural sweat on your part. You can do it, and do it well, but don't plan to cut any corners. Start from the beginning, put in the work required and reap a tremendous harvest. Keep in mind Dr. Paul Hiebert's timely words, "We need to always remember that a culture makes sense to it's people. If it does not seem clear to us, we are the ones who misunderstand, and we must study it further" (p. 94).

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