

# **Living and Working with U.S. Americans**



To help you gain a better understanding of the American way of life, we have prepared a list of some of the general characteristics of U.S. American social relations. Please remember these are generalizations and will vary from person to person.

## **GIFT GIVING**

U.S. Americans usually only give gifts on special occasions such as Christmas, birthdays, or anniversaries. Gift giving should not be thought of as a bribe (seeking special favors) or as requiring a gift in return.

## **EQUALITY**

U.S. Americans work better when they are in an atmosphere in which all are considered equal. While equality includes the equal right to seek the “good life,” it does not guarantee equality of talent or ability.

## **CONFRONTATION**

Discussing issues or ideas openly with other individuals is considered not only proper, but often a responsibility as well. U.S. Americans, particularly in a business situation, do not spend the time on polite social talk that many other nationalities do. You may be surprised to find getting right to the point immediately follows the briefest of introductions.

## **INFORMALITY AND FORMALITY**

In most cases U.S. Americans avoid elaborate social rituals. If, however, the interaction has other than just social importance (e.g., job possibility, admission interview), then actions frequently become somewhat more formal. Most of the time, however, U.S. Americans tend to treat everyone similarly with little concern given to titles or status.

## **COMPETITION**

The high value placed on achievement and equality leads U.S. Americans to compete with each other, and you’ll find both friendly and not-so-friendly competition everywhere. The U.S. American style of friendly joking, getting the last word in, and the quick reply are subtle forms of competition in America. Although such behavior is natural for U.S. Americans, it may appear quite overbearing to others.

## **TIME AND APPOINTMENTS**

The saying that “time is money” perhaps best expresses the U.S. American concept of time; it exemplifies the work ethic. Generally U.S. Americans, like people in most industrial nations, are highly conscious of the value of time and use it quite efficiently. The U.S. American attitude toward appointments is indicative of this philosophy. Since most of their daily activities are well planned, it is customary to make advance appointments for any visits to business or professional offices or to meet with most faculty or university administrators. Once you have made an appointment, punctuality is essential.

If you fail to keep an appointment or are late for it, it is extremely important for you to call and give an appropriate explanation. In addition, if you know you are going to be late, it is a good idea to call and inform the person you are meeting that you are going to be delayed. If you are late, and have not called ahead, you may find the person you are meeting with to be abrupt and even unpleasant. Some faculty, administrators, and doctors will cancel an appointment if you fail to be on time, and dentists have been known to charge a patient

for a missed appointment. Finally, since public lectures being on time, it is good to be punctual for these events as well.

### **COOPERATION**

U.S. Americans, although competitive, also engage in cooperative behavior. Though a large part of cooperation stems from liking and wishing to help others, it may also be a way of obtaining a goal. The idea behind this is to help the entire group accomplish its task. While this may appear opportunistic, the goal is to get things done and learn in the process so that in the future the individual may achieve on his or her own.

### **INVITATIONS**

U.S. Americans believe that invitations should be answered as soon as possible. Whenever an invitation is extended to you, formally through a note or informally by telephone, you will be expected to respond quickly and candidly. When accepting an invitation, make sure you have the correct time and place. It is also wise to have the host family's phone number in order to call and notify them in the event you must change your plans or are delayed by some unforeseen circumstances. While appointment times for social affairs are more flexible than business appointments, you should try to arrive as close to the scheduled time as possible, particularly if you are invited to dinner. Nothing annoys a host or hostess more than having food all ready to serve and finding that some of the guests have not yet arrived.

It is normal to thank a person or family for their hospitality by a telephone call or by mailing them a brief note after the visit. If you are invited to stay in an American home for a few days, giving a small gift to your host or hostess is greatly appreciated. An inexpensive gift from your own country is particularly nice. An expensive gift is not necessary and often tends to embarrass your hosts.

Under normal circumstances, a person who extends an invitation to you and takes you to a restaurant or theater takes care of the charges (bill) including the tip. You may wish to offer to pay but don't expect your offer to be accepted. However, since students are often short of money, an invitation may merely mean "We'd enjoy it if you joined us." If you are not sure, just ask. By the way, the term "Dutch Treat" or "Dutch" means that each person pays his or her own way.

### **CONVERSATION**

For most U.S. Americans silence is discomfoting. Small talk or superficial conversations are usually preferable to quiet. It is therefore common to hear people casually talking about the weather, sports, parties, food, clothing, tests, etc.

While talking, U.S. Americans are often made uncomfortable by extreme physical closeness. Eighteen inches is the minimum closeness they will usually tolerate, so don't stand very close to people when you are talking with them. Informal physical contact during conversation is also not encouraged by most Americans.

*(Adapted from the Syracuse University Handbook for International Students).*

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