

Activity Series 1: Culture and Leadership

This activity series covers the following topics:

- Defining culture – and how it has defined us
- How has culture shaped our identity and leadership styles?

Objectives: To understand what culture is, how culture impacts our actions and leadership styles

Time needed: 1-2 hours, depending on how many activities used, how long discussions go

Handouts: Copies of “Ingredients of culture” page. Optional: copies of “Culture is like a car” page

Introduce the activity:

Explain that we’re going to talk about what culture is, how culture has impacted who we are, and how it impacts leadership styles.

Group should walk through discussions together from “Culture is like a car” handout as well as “Ingredients of culture.” Participants should be comfortable with this material before moving on.

Preface:

Facilitator – before leading this activity explain the context to participants. You can say something like this:

“We’re going to have some conversations about leadership, cultural identity, and how who you are as a leader is shaped by your own cultural identity. We’ll be talking about different ways to be a leader. But first, we want to take a step back and look at culture itself. What is culture? What does it mean? Why would culture matter when you’re talking about leadership? Let’s start here.”

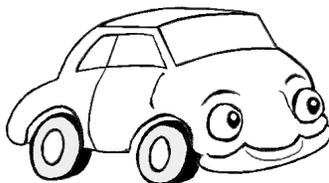
Culture is like a car

Walk participants through the “Culture is like a car” handout. You can distribute it in advance, or you can lead the discussion as indicated on the sheet. A visual helps – if you don’t use the handout, have them draw a car or look at an actual car or toy car during the conversation.

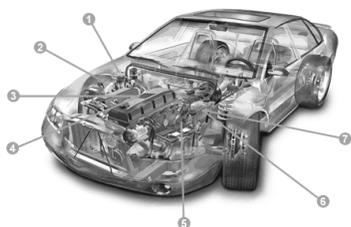
What is CULTURE? .

Culture is like a **car**.

You can learn some things about cars by looking at them on the **surface** but cars are really **complex** when you look **deeper**.



There are a lot of parts that make up a car. Many parts are visible by looking at the outside (body, paint color, wheels, headlights, windows, windshield, seats...). All of these things help make a car what it is, and make it somewhat unique.



However, those visible parts aren't the main things that make a car run. Cars also have hundreds of hard-to-see, complex and intricate little parts *inside* that do most of the work of making them run.

There are more complicated, below-the-surface parts of a car than visible ones.

Culture is like this too. Our cultures have some parts that are **pretty visible and obvious** to ourselves or other people and many parts that are **less visible, more complex and subtle** – even things we may have to think about to realize they're part of our own cultures.

What are some of the visible, obvious, and big ingredients of culture?

(Things like language, clothing, food, religion, cities, buildings, art...)

What are some of the less visible ingredients of culture? As a group or as

groups of two or three, talk about some subtle things that make up culture.

(Things like communication style, gender roles, and views about conflict).

Explain: These **less visible** things are often about **how we interact with one another**. These are things that affect how we **express leadership**. *Can you think of examples from your own cultural background?*

We also make **choices** about our cultures, to some extent. Just as we might choose some things about a car, we sometimes choose what aspects of our culture we wish to express, and in what way. Culture shapes us, and we shape culture.



Sure, you can tell just by looking that my culture's traditional cuisine involves carrots. But did you know that my culture also values avoiding conflict? Or that it places strong importance on education?

Sample Activities for “Ingredients of Culture”

Pick one of the following ways to facilitate the “Ingredients of Culture” handout on page 9 or develop your own activity.

Option 1. Spectrum

Explain the Ingredients of Culture handout and ask for examples of other cultural ingredients. Pick one indicator (e.g. “Attitude toward conflict”) and ask participants to stand on a spectrum between the two extremes – first based on where their culture falls (they can pick one of their cultural backgrounds if they have multiple) and second where they choose to fall personally. Discuss. If participants are comfortable with the material, broach the question of how factors other than ethnicity shape and define our cultures (e.g. socio-economic status, urban/rural/suburban etc.)

Option 2. Improvisation game:

Select three volunteers – particularly ones who enjoy performing or would like to be challenged to perform. Ask the rest of the group for examples of

- A location
- The names of three famous people
- Something people could disagree about.

These things don’t have to be related – and the scene is often more fun if they are not. (Example: Location = On top of the Space Needle; Conflict = what to have for dinner; Three famous people = the president, a pop star and a historical figure).

Next, assign the three roles to the three volunteers (or have them pick). Tell them they should now improvise a short scene about those three people, going to that location and having that conflict. After a few moments, when they are done, they can physically rewind the scene by running quickly backwards through the basic motions of the scene. Then, they should replay the scene, but this time, give them a cultural attitude to shape how they interact with each other. Give them an attitude (“Scene 2”) from either Example A or Example B, knowing that in a moment, they will replay the scene with the other attitude (“Scene 3”) from the pair.

Example A:

Scene 1: Original scene they improvise

Scene 2: Attitude = Conflict is fine, and sometimes necessary

Scene 3: Attitude = Conflict should be avoided

Example B:

Scene 1: Original scene they improvise

Scene 2: Attitude = Communication is only verbal

Scene 3: Attitude = Communication is often non-verbal (though they still speak, of course)

In total, they will play the scene three times.

Then, they should debrief as a group about how their communication changed through the three scenes. Ask whether, in the first scene (the one in which they hadn’t been told to have a particular attitude) any attitudes came through about conflict or communication that were similar to ones they intentionally played later.

Then, hand out the “Ingredients of Culture” sheet. Explain that these are some of the complex ingredients of culture, harder to see if you don’t know they are there – just like the workings under the car hood. Discuss their reactions to the sheet.

