



Building Cultural Awareness: Tips for Rotarians planning an exchange

Understanding culture

Culture is complex. At times, the underlying social values, assumptions, and behaviors associated with a culture can be difficult to understand from an outside perspective. Exchanges provide many opportunities to explore new cultures and see your own culture through the eyes of others. Some features of culture, like language, dress, music, and food, will be immediately visible, while other features, like people's attitudes toward age, personal space, work, and time, may be subtle. Consider these questions:

- What elements define your culture?
- How do these elements influence the way you think and behave?
- How do others view your culture?
- How does culture shape the way people see the world, themselves, and others?
- How do cultural attitudes influence the visible aspects of a culture?
- Why might it be possible to misunderstand someone from another culture?
- How can you learn to see something from another culture's perspective?
- Why is it important to understand culture?

Understanding a culture takes time and patience. In preparation for your exchange, try:

- Consulting travel guidebooks or videos that give a thorough description of your exchange partners' culture
- Speaking to people who are natives of your exchange partners' country to learn about the cultural norms
- Learning some of the language of the host country

Though Rotarians share many core values, they are culturally diverse. As you prepare to interact with your exchange partners, resist the urge to automatically interpret their words, gestures, values, and other aspects of behavior according to the standards of your culture. Remember: Although a person's behavior may not make sense in your culture, your behavior may not make sense in his or her culture either.

Attempting to understand the cultural background of your exchange partners will enable you to put cultural differences into context, understand your own culture on a more profound level, and make for a more enriching exchange experience. As you familiarize yourself with the language, customs, and beliefs of your exchange partners, you will improve your ability to function, interact, and communicate within a new cultural context.

During your exchange you will have a unique opportunity to forge lasting international friendships. Take full advantage of this opportunity by asking questions, communicating effectively, and actively participating in your exchange. Engaging other participants in an open dialogue is the best way to understand another culture.



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Understanding culture shock

Culture shock describes the feelings of anxiety, disorientation, and confusion that people may experience when they are immersed in a new cultural environment. A person suffering from culture shock will often seek out environments that are familiar and may exhibit hostility, irritability, and anxiety. Culture shock can occur when visiting a new country or after you return home, and varies from person to person.

To minimize the effects of culture shock:

- Familiarize yourself as much as possible with the host culture
- Actively participate in exchange activities
- Rely on your exchange team for support
- Share your experiences with others
- Participate in group follow-up meetings after an exchange
- Be open-minded and flexible

Always keep in mind the greater purpose of your exchange. If you strive to be respectful and friendly, you will come away from your exchange experience having made new and lasting friendships. Ask past exchange participants about their experience, and they will probably tell you that a little temporary cultural anxiety was well worth the reward of new friendships made.