

Cultural differences in the workplace: australia and us



- Tim Johnson

Anthropologist, James Downs, defined culture as “ a mental map which guides us in our relations to our surroundings and to other people” (Linsell, 2011). This definition supports the idea that culture influences the way in which individuals behave. America and Australia are connected in many ways, and both countries’ success is blatantly predominant even at a quick glance. Both countries are far more superior to the majority of countries around the globe, and a reason for that is their culture sets higher standards in their attempts to continue towards greatness. Although there are many similarities between the Australian and U. S. workplace culture, there are characteristics that illustrate the distinctions between the two cultures.

The United States and Australia have very similar upbringings, which is the result of their ties to the British colonies. The United States was formed as a result of immigrants fleeing from religious persecution, while Australia was settled by government workers and convicts. Both countries have similar cultures because the ancestors were predominantly Anglo- Saxon/ Caucasians, and both “ cultures grew through liberal immigration policies” (Linsell, 2011). The reason both nations illustrate similarities in culture is because they share connection to British involvement.

The Australian workplace culture differs from most, but Australia has found ways to promote excellence while still promoting happiness. Australia has a community-oriented heritage and is supporters of egalitarianism (Linsell, 2011). Egalitarianism can be defined as equality for all of man with respect to economics, politics, and society. The Australian workplace is also very

multicultural, and one in every 4 workers is from another culture (“ Spectrum MRC”, 2012). Australia also embraces different practices compared to the United States. These practices are reflected in their sometimes informal business meetings and interviews. The informality can be illustrated through their non-verbal communication such as proximity when interacting and body language (“ Spectrum MRC”, 2012). To an outsider the Australian workplace culture may seem informal, but within many domestic organizations this is common practice. Australian organizations prefer autonomy and flexibility in the workplace (Linsell, 2011), because it promotes a positive atmosphere that results in higher productivity.

The United States workplace culture is centered on command- control leadership and is hierarchy based, because equality is not deemed as important (Linsell, 2011). The hierarchy that the U. S. practices creates competition within the workplace to strive for success, while endorsing a selfish mentality among the employees. The United States takes a “ business first approach”, and favors when employees separate their business and personal lives (“ U. S. Business Culture”, 2011). This approach statistically encourages a more focused workplace, but at the cost of employees not finding enjoyment in their work and with their colleagues. To this day, America is still commonly referred to as “ The Melting Pot” even though the individuals that use this term do not know the true origin. This term was coined in the beginning of the 20th Century to characterize how the immigrants were all mixing together and creating one blended culture. Most individuals improperly use the term to describe different cultures simply living among one another. Australia is wonderful because there are so many

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diverse cultures, but all of the cultures remain unique and avoid merging in to one. The lack of combining promotes individuality, which aids in the citizens and in turn the employees becoming better developed and appreciative of their positions. The American culture is about demonstrating assertion and never displaying weakness, because weakness is commonly associated with failure. Even though the United States exhibits superiority and their practices are effective, they sacrifice the personal connections that aid to create higher team morale.

The workplace culture of Australia and the U. S. take different approaches to how they operate their organizations, but similarities overlap in both cultures. The similarity that is predominant in both countries is the controversy of gender inequality (Leahy, 2011). Currently women in the workforce aren't "able to access and enjoy the same rewards, resources, and opportunities" (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013) that men receive in the same workplace. Even in modern society discrimination still resonates and women are unfairly forced to deal with this injustice. The term most commonly used to describe the gender inequality present in the workplace is "the glass ceiling" (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001). The glass ceiling alludes to a woman's ability to see to a further point than she can actually reach. Even if the average woman attempted to work towards a higher ranking position, she will typically come across difficulty when trying to advance to that position. Women are still facing discrimination in employment (Doughney, 2007) and more men reach higher paid executive and specialized positions (Ross-Smith & McGraw, 2010).

Australia and the United States have similarities and differences, but even

though they are both global leaders they still have room to expand and change from their current discriminatory practices.

My experience in an Australian workplace has been eye opening and led me to a culture that has many positive differences from my own. An aspect of Australian culture that differs from my experiences in the United States is the desire to promote a community based workplace. At Greenwood Dental the employees were completely welcoming and personable; this was the beginning to my acceptance in to their workplace family. After interning for a few days, they began to see my hard work ethic and my willingness to assist anyone's needs. My determination to benefit their business in any way possible illustrated to them that I was serious about becoming a part of their team, and from that point on I was viewed as a team member. A prime example of their communal persona is seen in their lunch break room. The break room has qualities similar to a family room in a household and they also bring food for everyone to share. This may not seem like much, but promoting this type of workplace led to a productive and friendly environment. Typically in the United States, everyone keeps to themselves and does their own work, but in Australia they believe in a civic based culture.

Australian culture favors equality and during my time at Greenwood, I never felt underappreciated or like an outsider. In the U. S. it is very common to feel isolated and unacknowledged, because everyone is trying to advance themselves instead of working collaboratively. All the employees know their position within the company and that the dentists are the priority, but everyone's position is necessary in order to run a successful business.

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Greenwood Dental was made up of many different cultures and it was exciting working with such a diverse group of individuals. It is imperative that individuals submerge themselves in additional cultures in order to understand others and even more importantly develop themselves.

Greenwood Dental's staff consists of employees from seven different countries, so being immersed in such a culturally rich environment aided my development towards better understanding and respect for equality.

Australia and the United States come from related backgrounds and as a result the cultures share comparable characteristics, but when analyzing workplace culture the distinction is tremendously clear. The Australian workplace culture tends to be more communal and flexible, while the U. S. encourages hierarchy and competition. A positive workplace culture is a result of motivation, productivity, quality work, and retention (" Building a Positive", 2013) and in my opinion Australia is better at acquiring the positive workplace with respect to America. Australian culture strives for positivity and satisfaction, while the United States attempts to improve only their economic status. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States, once said, " Happiness is not the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort". After my experiences in Australia, I can assert that Australia's workplace with respect to the U. S. has a more positive, enjoyable, and overall better atmosphere to be a part of. The Australian workplace culture chooses to sacrifice uniformity in order to allow for individuality and happiness.

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