



Potential impact of cultural differences on workers' compensation through the lens of a Chinese American - Part 3

By Bin Chen ■ December 1, 2016

This series of three blogs about culture are from a presentation given by the author to the Oregon Workers' Compensation Board and administrative law judges in October 2016.

I have spent half of my life here in the United States. So you would expect me to have assimilated to some degree, right? Plus, even if cultural differences are real, they are really matters of degree rather than opposites. We are different, but not really that much. But we are different enough that subtle differences can potentially cause conflicts. Culture, after all, provides people with ways of thinking, seeing, hearing and interpreting the world. Since I was born and raised in China, I may see the world slightly different than you, or process information somewhat different from you.

Here are some general tips for handling claims with employees from a different culture:

- Keep in mind that communication styles vary from culture to culture. Learn about how your values, attitudes, behaviors, and communication style may be perceived by someone from another culture (e.g., they may interpret humor as not taking things seriously). Seek feedback from the people you work with or from a friendly party in the other culture.
- Each country has different dialects, and not all dialects are mutually intelligible. To avoid dialectal discordance, know the region of the claimant's birthplace before requesting an interpreter. (For example, there are roughly seven large groups of Chinese dialects with variations within each group.) Many of my friends are from Hong Kong, and when I speak my Shanghai dialect, they cannot understand a word I am saying.
- Relate to each person as an individual, and not as a stereotype. Understanding the values, expectations, and beliefs that drive behaviors in different cultures should inform your actions towards an individual, not direct them. Culture does not determine anything, but it shapes everything.
- Develop your empathy skills and show people you are making every effort to see and feel things as they do. Think of yourself as a "translator" of your own culture and protocols. Making a small change such as greeting

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people in their own language or showing knowledge of their culture and its customs will be seen positively.

- Assume nothing—a smile and handshake are not necessarily an agreement, “yes” can mean “no”, unsmiling may not mean unfriendly, silence may not mean disagreement. Ask questions and be flexible.
- Remember: while people from different cultures are different to some degree, we are not opposites. It is not difficult to find common grounds. ■

See also part one: A discussion of four key elements that can be identified in Chinese culture.

See also part two: A discussion of the elements of Chinese culture that can affect workers' compensation claims.

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