

## ACTIVITY: The ABCs of American Culture

This is another view on core US values as found in a book called *The ABCs of American Culture*. Earn up \$20 by producing a well thought out essay of a page or more about how these values cohere or conflict with the core values found in the *Cultural Detective USA*.

### The Ten Commandments of American Culture

1. You can't argue with success. (Be a success.)
2. Live and let live.
3. Time flies when you're having fun. (Have lots of fun.)
4. Shop till you drop.
5. Just do it.
6. No pain, no gain. (Get tough.)
7. Enough is enough. (Stand up for your rights.)
8. Time is money. (Don't waste time.)
9. Rules are made to be broken. (Think for yourself.)
10. God helps those who help themselves. (Work hard.)

This book contains two overlapping descriptions of American culture. The first one is only four pages long. It focuses on just ten proverbs or sayings that Americans use all the time.

The second description is forty-four pages long—the body of the book. It includes the same ten sayings but adds many others and gives more detail about each topic. It also suggests questions for you to discuss with your American friends.

Of course these ten sayings, which I have called the “[Ten Commandments of American Culture](#),” are not really “commandments.” Several of them are not even worded like “commandments.” They seem to be ordinary statements such as, “[Time is money](#).” They have no religious or moral authority like the “Ten Commandments” of the Bible do for Jews and Christians. However, if you break any of these “cultural commandments,” most Americans will think you do not fit very well in America. Some of us may even criticize you or insult you. We certainly will not understand you.

The situation will be very similar to what you have probably seen Americans do in your country. We come. We do not bother to learn the basic “cultural commandments” in your country. Soon we break them. The local people are offended and we Americans cannot understand why. By reading this book, you may learn some ways to avoid that problem while you are in America.

#### ***Commandment 1. You can't argue with success. (Be a success.)***

Success is probably the most praised thing in American life. It relates to so many other characteristics of American life—individualism, freedom, goal-setting, progress, experimenting, social mobility, making money, pragmatism (doing what works), and optimism (expecting good things to happen).

Americans want to “make a success of themselves.” This is the “American Dream” which has attracted millions of immigrants and been taught to generations of American children. Everyone wants to be a success at something. If you do not think that way, you are considered a failure.

It is almost impossible to criticize success. For example, if an employee does something without properly consulting his supervisor, and as a result the company gets a big contract with a new customer, the employee will get much more praise than blame. The success of getting the new contract is more important than the failure to consult a superior.

Sometimes people will even say cheating is justified if it brings success. Other people, however, may argue with success of that kind.

### ***Commandment 2. Live and let live. (Be tolerant.)***

Americans love freedom and privacy. In a way that means we love to be left alone. We don't want anyone interfering in our affairs, giving us advice, or trying to run our lives. We want people to "stay off our backs," "stay out of our way," and "mind their own business."

Perhaps *Live and let live* should be listed as the first commandment of American culture, even more important than success. It means that no one should object to anyone else's way of living. If you like opera and I like country music, that is fine. If you want to get married and I want to live with someone without marrying her, that is fine too. Neither of us should try to influence the other or object to the way the other lives.

If we are not tolerant of other people, we may damage their self-esteem (their own view of their value as human beings). To attack someone's self-esteem is to break one of the most basic rules of American life.

### ***Commandment 3. Time flies when you're having fun. (Have lots of fun.)***

Americans try to have as much fun as possible. Much of our fun comes through various kinds of entertainment, especially TV. But we also try to turn other activities into fun. Shopping is fun. Eating is fun, and in case it is not enough fun, we will put a playground inside the fast-food restaurant so the kids can have fun playing while the grown-ups have fun sitting and eating. Learning to read can be turned into fun, as the Sesame Street TV programs show. People try to get a job which is fun (though not many succeed). Having fun is the major preoccupation of youth, retired people, and many of those in between.

In most situations Americans are very time-conscious. We know how long it will be till our next appointment, how long till this work day is over, and how long it will take to drive home. However, we forget to watch the clock when we are having fun. That is why "time flies," that is, time seems to go by very quickly.

### ***Commandment 4. Shop till you drop.***

Many Americans shop as a form of recreation. Even if we are not shopping for anything in particular, we simply enjoy looking at all the options. We love the whole process of choosing what to buy and where to buy it. It is a major topic of social conversation. If you want to impress an American friend, convince him or her that you are a "smart shopper."

The saying, *Shop till you drop*, is never used seriously as a command yet it holds a serious meaning. We are perhaps the ultimate consumer society, and this saying describes us so well that it could be our national motto.

### ***Commandment 5. Just do it.***

We are people of action. We do not like too much planning. That seems indecisive and perhaps a waste of time. We do not like rules and regulations that prevent action. We strongly dislike authority structures where people are expected to inform several other people before they do anything. We get an idea and we want to *just do it*.

Action is seen as the key to success. Action is more valuable than planning, checking regulations, or informing people.

### ***Commandment 6. No pain, no gain. (Get tough. Don't whine.)***

Americans are always seeking to gain something or improve something. We expect to have to work to achieve our goals. Success usually involves pain and sacrifice. It will not happen by itself.

If someone often complains about how hard something is, we call that person a “wimp.” We look down on such people. The ones we admire are the ones who know what they want and do not mind the pain it takes to get it. They follow the Sixth Commandment, “Get tough.”

***Commandment 7. Enough is enough. (Stand up for your rights.)***

Human rights and dignity are so basic to American thinking that we assume everyone else must think the same way. This proverb implies the command, “Stand up for your rights.” In the American Revolution, America as a nation said to Britain, Enough is enough, that is, “You have ruled us for long enough. You will not rule us any more.”

As we saw in [Commandment 2, Live and let live](#), Americans do not want people interfering in their lives. When we sense interference, we push it away.

***Commandment 8. Time is money. (Don't waste time.)***

We Americans are very time-conscious and very money-conscious. Many of us get paid by the hour for the work we do. We give the employer our time in order to get money.

The idea that *time is money* has gotten into our minds so deeply that it affects our whole lives. Wasting time is as bad as wasting money, so we schedule everything and we hurry everywhere. We often signal the end of a phone conversation or a meeting by saying, “Well, I don't want to take up any more of your time.”

If you really want to annoy an American, sit down and talk as if you have nothing else to do for the rest of the day. You will be breaking the Eighth Commandment of American culture, “Don't waste time.”

***Commandment 9. Rules are made to be broken. (Think for yourself.)***

We obey rules most of the time, but we see rules as someone else's idea of how we should do things. We think the rule might have been appropriate in some other situation but it might not be appropriate for our situation now. Therefore we break it and do what we think is a better idea. This proverb implies the commandment, “Think for yourself in every situation. Do not just obey rules.”

Though Americans say, *Rules are made to be broken*, we never say, “Laws are made to be broken.” Laws are official legal “rules” and we proudly claim that in America, “No one is above the law.”

***Commandment 10. God helps those who help themselves. (Work hard.)***

In a list of “Ten Commandments,” one might expect that God would be mentioned in the first commandment rather than the last one. But in American culture, God actually does come at the end of the list. For most Americans, God is much less a concern than success, money and time. (There are many Americans who put God at the top of their personal list of priorities, but they are a minority within American culture.)

*God helps those who help themselves* could mean that God blesses people who work hard or it could mean, “God doesn't really help anyone. Your success depends on you, not God.” Either way, the proverb points to the same commandment, “Whether you believe in God or not, work as hard as you can.” It is better to be independent than to depend on other people.

[Click here to read a description of the booklet, \*The ABCs of American Culture\*.](#)



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