

Chapter 10

Organizational Culture and Norms

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No matter where you go, remember that different places have different standards & norms of behavior. Help the team keep an eye out for what is appropriate -- or not -- where you are.

-- "Spike," in the *Team Leader Toolkit*,
Resources for Service-Learning,
AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Activity:	Page
✓What Do You Do When...? (#19)	427
Other Ways to Address Organizational Norms	435
 Supporting Information:	
✓Organizational Culture and Norms: Learning "The Rules"	441

SCOPE

This chapter provides information and tools to help members function effectively within the organizational culture and norms of their host organizations. It is designed especially for groups of members who have had little or no previous work or volunteer experience within a formal organization. The chapter focuses on identifying aspects of organizational norms and culture with which AmeriCorps members should be familiar, and helping members find ways to learn and adjust to organizational culture and to the demands of an organizational environment.

IMPORTANCE

AmeriCorps members differ considerably in their age and in their previous job and volunteer experience. While many members may have extensive professional experience, paid and volunteer, AmeriCorps may be the first structured non-school experience for others. This chapter is important because it helps ensure that such

members leave the PST prepared to adapt successfully to the structure of an AmeriCorps host organization. This can enable them to avoid difficulties similar to those faced by many young adults when they begin their first job. If AmeriCorps members receive help in making this adjustment, their AmeriCorps experience is more likely to be positive and productive, and their post-AmeriCorps adjustment to the world of work is likely to be far easier.

TARGETED USERS

This chapter was designed primarily for the persons developing and delivering the PST training. It is useful to involve host site supervisors in developing this aspect of your PST. If yours is not a first-year program, consult with a member from the previous year to see how the materials in this chapter might be used and modified.

EXPECTED LEARNING

This chapter provides members who have limited “professional” experience, paid or volunteer, with an understanding of some typical groundrules for working in an organization and adjusting successfully to its culture and norms.

RELATED CHAPTERS

The information in this chapter can be used at any time in the PST, but might especially easily be used in coordination with *Chapter 6: What Every Member Must Know*, page 245.

Hint: All members, regardless of experience, will benefit from being reminded of the need to adjust to the organizational norms and culture of their host organizations. However, if your AmeriCorps members have extensive volunteer or job experience, you may not need to cover the information included here. If some members have little or no such experience, you may want to run a session for the members who need it while others are engaged in some other activity.

**LESSONS LEARNED:
IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING MEMBERS FOR
AN “OFFICE SETTING”**

AmeriCorps programs — especially those whose members are young and have limited job or volunteer experience — report that preparing members for working in a formal organization is a top priority. According to one Director, “the number one request of our host site supervisors in terms of our pre-service g is to add an extensive section” on basic issues such as how to function in an office setting and professional ethics.

At this program, when 23 host site supervisors were asked in a workshop to identify the *top five things they want members to know when they return to the host site after pre-service training* three of the five answers in every group dealt with organizational norms. Only two groups included project-related technical skills in their top five list. Most often mentioned were the following:

- How to work in an office setting: office procedures and protocol
- Dress code
- Work ethics
- Professional ethics and confidentiality
- What is supervision
- Professionalism

**LESSONS LEARNED:
MEMBER-VOLUNTEER RELATIONSHIPS**

AmeriCorps members are often assigned to an organization which already has an active volunteer program. This situation offers both opportunities and challenges.

Members and volunteers together can accomplish a great deal. The challenge is to make sure that members and volunteers see each other as colleagues and allies, not competitors for interesting assignments and appreciation.

AmeriCorps programs have found that volunteers sometimes feel displaced by members, who may receive more attention and more "responsible" assignments because they are present more hours.

Some AmeriCorps programs recruit members from among their volunteers, enabling active volunteers to become involved full-time. However, most volunteers have other commitments and don't want to become members. They do, however, want to feel valued.

Pre-service training is a time to ensure that members respect and appreciate volunteers. Consider having your most experienced volunteers assist with PST, especially the technical skills aspects. If PST is provided in your community, plan a community project or social activity involving both members and volunteers. In introducing members to the organization, emphasize the critical role of volunteers.

An important role for members in many programs is "volunteer generation" -- helping to recruit and involve volunteers, who work with members and may eventually replace members when they leave their assignments. The more effectively members interact with volunteers, the more successful they will be in accomplishing this task.

Activity #19: What Do You Do When...?

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:

Facilitation skills
Familiarity with personnel and organizational culture issues

Time Required:

1 hour 15 minutes

Materials Needed:

Member Instructions
Organizational Culture and Norms: Learning "The Rules"
Cooperative Learning Roles Chart posted on newsprint

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the activity, members should be able:

- To understand and explain the concept of organizational culture and norms
- To identify major aspects of organizational culture and norms which they need to understand in order to work effectively in their host organization

Skill Development:

Interpersonal relations

Directions:

Introduce the concept of organizational culture and norms. Each organization has its own style, its formal and its unwritten rules, and its expectations about behavior. Refer to the supporting material in this chapter for content and examples. Ask members whether they have ever experienced "culture shock" when they first became part of an organization -- a school, place of employment, community agency, etc. Discuss what it felt like to be a stranger, and how they went about learning the organizational culture and becoming a part of it. Spend 10 to 15 minutes on this discussion.

Hint: This activity is helped by having the small groups be heterogeneous in terms of their level of prior experience within a formal organization.

Now divide the members into small cooperative learning groups. Ask them to look at the *Member Instructions*, and assign two or three scenarios to each group. Each member should read through

the assigned scenarios individually, and try to answer the questions in the *Member Instructions*. Review them with the group and be sure members are with the terminology. Members should use their best judgment and their knowledge of organizations to decide how they would handle each situation, how it might have been prevented, and how the situation relates to the concept of organizational culture or norms -- or of broader "professional behavior."

Allow 5 minutes for members to review their assigned scenarios individually. Members should then share and discuss their responses, and try to come to a consensus about each scenario. Allow 20 minutes for this activity.

Then bring the group back together. Give everyone 5 minutes to read through all the scenarios. Now go through the scenarios one by one, asking the reporter to summarize his/her group's response. For each scenario, ask if the full group agrees with the response, and talk about the norm involved. Integrate into the discussion the **processing, generalization, and application** of this information, by scenario.

As the discussion progresses, write on newsprint each norm mentioned. After all scenarios have been reviewed, go over the list with the group, and ask if members are aware of other organizational norms that were not identified. Ask the observers to talk about which scenarios seemed to be most difficult to address, and which ones led to emotional responses.

Emphasize discussion of how, when entering a new organization, one can learn these organizational norms, and the importance of learning them as soon as possible. Ask for ideas about how a member can appropriately obtain such information when they arrive at their placement, to avoid some of the problems described here. The reporting and discussion phase should take about 30 minutes.

Refer members to the handout on organizational culture and norms at the end of this chapter.

Variations:

If your members have diverse levels of prior experience within a formal organization, consider beginning this unit by asking which members have had prior job or volunteer experience. Try using a "value line" approach. Ask all members to get into a single line.

One end of the room should be designated as the place to stand for members who have a great deal of job and volunteer experience and feel very comfortable with the idea of adapting to new organizational norms and culture. The other end of the room should be designated as the place to stand if you have no prior job or volunteer experience and feel very uncertain of how to adapt to new organizational norms and culture. Members should stand somewhere between those two points depending on their position on that continuum.

Then count off the members into the number of groups you want for the activity. If you want five groups, have members count off 1-2-3-4-5. This method ensures heterogenous groups; every group will have some people with a good deal of prior experience and some members with very little.

Activity #19: What Do You Do When....?

Member Instructions

Assignment:

To have members consider a variety of situations which they may encounter in their project assignments, and determine how best to handle them -- and in the process examine issues related to organizational culture and norms.

Directions:

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on the roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles list posted in the training room.

Below are a series of scenarios. Your assignment is to answer the following questions about each scenario assigned to your group:

- What aspect of organizational culture or norms -- or of broader "professional behavior" is involved here?
- As a member, how should I handle this situation?
- How could the situation have been prevented?
- Is any additional information needed to know how best to handle this situation?

Individually read through the scenarios assigned to your group, and write down your responses to these questions. Spend 5 minutes on this task.

Now compare your answers in the group, and try to reach consensus. Be prepared to share your discussion and decisions with the full group. You have 20 minutes for this group work.

Scenarios:

1. You are responsible for delivering meals-on-wheels to senior citizens, many of whom are unable to leave their homes. The route is very complex and you are the only one who knows it. You wake up feeling ill and want to call in sick, but are afraid that if you don't deliver meals today, some people will go hungry. What do you do?

2. A long-lost boyfriend of one of the female members begs you for her home address and phone number, saying that he wants to surprise her. She has mentioned him in the past, recalling what a good time they had together. What do you do?

3. You agree to answer phones while the only other person in your small host organization's office goes out to get something to eat. This is your third day as an AmeriCorps member, and you know very little about the organization. The telephone rings. The person on the line is a senior county official who says she absolutely MUST talk to the Executive Director in the next half hour on a "funding matter." You have no idea where the Director is, or how he can be reached. What do you do?
4. Your host organization, which works on gang violence, has been in the news a lot lately, because one of its staff was severely beaten by police, who thought he was a gang member. The organization is suing. You have had no direct involvement with the situation, but the person who was beaten is a friend of yours. One early morning you are leaving the office when Channel 3 News shows up with a camera crew and sticks a microphone in your face, while rattling off several questions about the incident. What do you do?
5. You have been encountering a great deal of hostility from a young staff member at your host organization, a day care facility. She is about your age, and her responsibilities are similar to yours, but she is full-time staff and has been with the agency for three years. You can't figure out the source of the obvious resentment. Finally, after she is very nasty to you in front of two parents, you confront her and ask what you have done to make her so angry. She says, "You get health insurance and I don't. You get an educational award and I don't. Why should you get these things, when I have been working here for three years?" What do you do?
6. You are involved in an after-school enrichment and parenting education project and make a lot of home visits. Usually you make an appointment before a home visit, but today you are going to see a woman whose little daughter has been behaving strangely while at the center; she seems afraid of everything. You knock on the door, and the woman comes to open it a crack. She has clearly been crying, and there are bruises on her face. In the background, you hear a man yelling at her. She asks if you can come back later. You ask her quietly if there is anything you can do to help, and she says "No, everything is fine. It's just an argument. Don't worry," and closes the door. What do you do?
7. Because your organization works with youth who have had criminal justice problems, you receive each month a list of juvenile arrests. Your job is to try to get them into your program. Last month's list just arrived. One of the other

members -- who works in a youth program that does tutoring -- says "I wonder if any of the youth in the tutoring program are on that list. May I see it?" What do you do?

8. You have just started your project assignment and have not yet received any formal orientation. Your first three days were spent at a satellite center, but now you will be in the main office for two days; one thing you need to do is prepare a work plan for your work in the satellite center. You arrive in the morning and find that the receptionist doesn't know who you are, and is unaware of any office space set aside for you. She says the Project Director (the only person from this office you have met) won't be in until noon. What do you do?
9. You are assigned to an elderly services center along with one other member. The center has two staff members and a half dozen active volunteers, most of them over 60. Before you came, they had to do everything -- cook meals, lead a variety of recreational groups, help seniors apply for Supplemental Security Income or deal with problems in their Social Security or Medicare, even drive the van when the part-time driver was ill. Many of the volunteers are at the center four to six hours a day, and work very hard to assist the seniors. The first assignment given you as members is to develop a more coordinated, structured recreational program for the center. The two of you have been interviewing the seniors to determine their interests. After about two days of this, you become aware that several volunteers, who initially treated you like their children or grandchildren, have become very distant. What do you do?
10. Your host organization is a large nonprofit organization with a kitchen that seems to be the informal gathering place. Most people seem to bring their lunches, and different groups eat in there at different times. You are the only member at this agency, and your supervisor is usually in the field. For the past three days you have gone into the kitchen to eat at different times, and never has anyone included you in a conversation other than to say hello. Once you said something, and it was as if you weren't there. You are beginning to wonder if you did something wrong. What do you do?
11. You serve as a teacher's aide in a public school. There are regular teacher meetings, and your teacher always takes you with him. You are the only aide at these meetings. For the first two, you were silent. Today, the discussion involves a student you have been working closely with, and you have information which

you feel the teachers need to understand. The problem is that you have no idea whether it is appropriate to participate in the meeting. What do you do?

12. You have been a member for ten months. Yesterday, your supervisor told you that the agency has not yet succeeded in raising the matching funds for the program. She asks whether you would object to being pulled off your crew for a week to prepare some proposals and visit some funders with her. What do you do?
13. Like most of the members, you don't have a lot of money, and most of your work involves beautification and other physical labor in the community. So you usually dress quite casually. One day while you are in the office, you hear a senior staff member say, "When is someone going to tell those slobs from AmeriCorps that we don't dress like street people in this office?" What do you do?
14. You are assigned to an elementary school, and spend most of your time tutoring second graders with reading problems. You divide your time between two classrooms, each of which has a teacher and two parent volunteers. You have only been at your assignment for a few weeks, but have noticed that the parent volunteers in one classroom are very actively involved in some activity at least twice a week, while those in the other classroom have stopped by only once in three weeks. The actively involved parents seem to have a close working relationship with the teacher. The teacher in the other classroom is new and does not seem to know the parents well. You ask the new teacher about your role in relation to the parent volunteers, and she says, "I know we need them, but I just don't have time to organize their activities. This is my first year teaching second grade and I have my hands full developing my lesson plans and dealing with the children's problems." What might you do?

Other Ways to Address Organizational Norms

Some AmeriCorps programs may need additional activities related to organizational norms. If your members include many young people who have had little or no volunteer or work experience, providing an in-depth orientation on how to function in an office setting or formal organization may be extremely important. Below are some suggestions for additional activities addressing this topic. Most can be structured for use with cooperative learning groups or with pairs of members; see the instructions for the Activity above for a model. Consider combining several of these activities to fit the needs of your members.

1. LEARNING FROM OTHERS' EXPERIENCE PANEL

Identify three or four past members and/or former participants in other similar programs such as AmeriCorps*VISTA or the Civilian Conservation Corps (see *Contacts*, page 623, in the Resources section). Look for individuals whose program assignment was their first experience within a formal organization, or who had limited prior work or volunteer experience. Ask them to prepare a brief presentation on their experiences, difficulties, and confusion related to organizational norms and "office procedure" and their suggestions for how members can minimize problems related to learning organizational norms. You might title the presentation something like "Things I needed to know but was afraid to ask." Allow plenty of time for questions and discussion. Then use one of the following activities to build on what members learned from the panel.

2. 10 KEY QUESTIONS

Begin with a panel as described in #1 or with a discussion about member expectations with regard to working in an office setting or with a crew. Ask members to visualize how they think a day might go, and identify knowledge or experience gaps. Then have members work in cooperative learning groups to develop lists of the "10 key questions" they will ask at the beginning of their project assignments -- or try to get answered in their project-level orientation or pre-service training. Discuss or role play how they might best ask their supervisors these questions.

3. SHARING EXPERIENCES

If your member group includes people with varied levels of volunteer and work experience -- such as an intergenerational mix of members -- form heterogeneous cooperative learning groups. Ask "experienced" members to share their experiences on their first job or in-depth volunteer assignment. Have them focus on sharing the things they didn't know about how organizations function, didn't

ask, and learned in difficult or embarrassing ways, as well as the things they learned by asking or through orientation. Then have the groups develop a set of recommendations for how members can identify what they need to know and find appropriate ways -- formal and informal -- of obtaining the information from site supervisors or other sources. Have the groups share their recommendations and come up with a joint set of suggestions for members.

4. THE THING THAT SCARES ME MOST...

Do this activity when site supervisors or other representatives from project sites are present at the training. Ask members to prepare and submit index cards answering the following question:

The thing that scares me most about my project assignment is....

Give members time to think before preparing their index cards, and ask for them at the end of the day or before lunch. Member names are not needed unless the member would like to talk to someone individually about the topic. Have trainers review and categorize these responses and develop an information session to answer them. Have site supervisors and representatives of collaborating partners present, and ask them to respond to the concerns of the members. If some concerns do not fit into the organizational culture topic, be sure they are dealt with at some point during the training.

5. REASONABLE RULES

Members with limited organizational experience sometimes have difficulty understanding how hard it is to develop "rules" that seem fair and rational to most people. To help members understand the complexity of setting organizational procedures, put them in the position of having to develop some policies themselves. Divide the members into cooperative learning groups and ask each one to develop "reasonable rules" for a hypothetical organization concerning some aspect of organizational culture. If they can't come to consensus, ask them to prepare a majority and minority report. Appropriate topics and reasons for choosing them are suggested below:

- **Dress codes** - Members who work outside in crews or do home renovation or other physical labor may expect to dress very informally, yet this may be seen as inappropriate when they are in the organization's offices; there may be generational or cultural differences in what is considered "acceptable" dress. (In a workshop of host site supervisors, the issue of dress codes was mentioned very often as a topic they wished to have covered in pre-service training.)

- **Sharing equipment** - Often members must share offices, computers, telephones, or other equipment -- even desks -- with each other and/or agency staff. Clarity on priorities and etiquette for using equipment can be important in minimizing tension among members and between members and agency staff.
- **Expectations for evening and weekend work** - Some member assignments may require a good deal of evening and/or weekend work, particularly assignments involving community-based work with youth. Some organizations expect this to be done in addition to work during the day, while others provide compensatory time or adjust starting hours to ensure an eight-hour work day. Lack of clarity on these expectations can lead to staff concerns about member commitment and member resentment.
- **Interacting with your supervisor** - Many members have limited experience reporting to supervisors and may not be clear on what supervisors need and want to know, such as when members arrive and leave, when they need to take time off for a doctor's appointment or personal needs, when they are ill, etc.

Have groups present and other members say whether they agree or disagree with the suggested rules. In processing, ask whether there was disagreement within the group. This activity works particularly well with diverse or intergenerational member groups. It is very helpful to have some host site supervisors present to talk about their actual rules and compare them with the suggested rules developed by the member groups -- and explain why they are different. A possible variation: ask some groups to take the role of the site supervisors and others to take the role of members, and see if they come up with different "reasonable rules."

6. ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

If member assignments are likely to raise complex ethical questions, prepare an activity involving some scenarios or case studies related to those issues, and ask members how they would address them. Divide members into cooperative learning groups, have each group address one or two scenarios, and have them present their solutions (the format for Activity #19, page 427, in this chapter can be used). You might give multiple-choice responses to the questions and then ask members to select one and be prepared to defend their answer. These issues may relate to their specific assignments, in which case it is important to have site supervisors and other host agency as well as AmeriCorps program personnel present to discuss these issues. Some possible scenarios (revise or replace these to fit your program's specific assignments):

- You work in a school setting. You believe, based on physical and emotional evidence, that one of the children is being abused. She tells you a parent has

been "punishing" her. The teacher says it is better to mind your own business. What do you do?

- You make home visits to new mothers. One of the women you visit is being physically abused by her significant other. Once, you arrive right after she has been beaten, and end up putting ice on a black eye and bandaging a cut and bruised arm. She refuses to go to the emergency room or to take action. What do you do?
- You provide housing counseling to families. One of the families has a complicated problem which may have legal implications. You need advice on how to handle it, but the head of the family says he trusts you but does not want the situation discussed with anyone else. What do you do?
- Another member does something which you consider unethical -- s/he regularly reports more hours than were really worked, and has been doing it regularly for the past two months. What do you do?
- You believe that one of the students in your after-school tutoring program is helping other students with their homework, which means you aren't sure what they are learning. You specifically tell everyone that they are not to collaborate on the next assignment, but four people come up with the same wrong answer. You know this student comes from an abusive family and desperately wants to be liked. What do you do?

Possible multiple-choice responses:

- Do nothing
- Talk to your supervisor
- Talk to someone more senior than your supervisor
- Ask advice from other members

Supporting Information

Organizational Culture and Norms: Learning "The Rules"

You can't survive without knowing the rules and norms by which the organization operates -- the "organizational culture." Sometimes these are explicitly stated; more often they are "understood" by staff, volunteers, and Board members. Some of these norms involve formal personnel policies or volunteer rules, but it may not be clear which ones cover AmeriCorps members, who have a special status that is neither staff nor volunteer.

Norms and rules cover many aspects of organizational functioning, but are especially likely to include the following:

- Hours and lunch breaks
- Sick leave, vacation, and holidays
- Dress code
- Who needs to know where you are at all times
- Handling the telephones
- Formality and language (addressing people, especially senior staff and Board members, as Mr./Ms. or by first names)
- Participation in staff meetings (includes attendance and actual participation)
- Computer etiquette (if you share, who has priority, handling E-mail, etc.)
- Access to information
- Rules of confidentiality (regarding personnel, organizational information, and customer/client information)
- Representation (including who may speak to the press)
- Chain of command (what if you have a problem with your supervisor?)

If you don't know the norms, here are some key questions to ask:

- Is there a personnel manual? If so, does it address some of these issues? How much of it applies to AmeriCorps members?
- What are the regular working hours?
- How are breaks and lunch periods handled?
- How does one report in "for duty" daily? Who needs to know if you are ill?
- What do you do if you need to leave your job site early -- whom and how do you ask?
- What are the dress codes?
- How do people address each other (first names, Mr./Ms./Dr.)?
- What is your role -- exactly? This includes your agreed-upon objectives, precise tasks to perform, and codes of behavior.
- Are there staff meetings? Are you expected to attend? To participate actively?
- What program, client, and staff information is public, and what is confidential?
- Which rules are considered so important that breaking them would get you into serious trouble?

You also need to know how to deal with your specific responsibilities and with broader personnel issues. This means that you will need to find out whom to approach to find out:

- Your specific responsibilities
- Office space and equipment arrangements for members
- How to deal with resentment from staff, especially if it involves members as a group and is unrelated to you personally
- Whom to go to for help in resolving problems among members
- What to do if you need help in relating to your supervisor

It can be uncomfortable to ask some of these questions early in your placement. But it is far more uncomfortable to make mistakes because you didn't get these questions answered. Most host supervisors will appreciate member efforts to clarify roles, responsibilities, norms, and expectations. They will recognize that the better you understand what is expected of you, the more effectively you can perform.

