

Text for speech on The Inbound Syndrome  
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Dennis White

Today I would like to talk about something that happens, to some degree, to all Inbounds, where ever they are from and wherever they go in Youth Exchange. It is directly related to Culture Shock, and if Inbound Students and Youth Exchange Officers are not aware of it, it can potentially have a negative effect on the quality of the exchange year. (slide 2) I call it “The Inbound Syndrome”. It refers to an almost universal tendency for Inbound Students, and expatriates of any kind to gather together and become very close to one another when living in a foreign country. Often this can be to the detriment of their ability to immerse effectively into the host culture. Along with maintaining excessive electronic contact with friends and family back home, it is one of the two most common obstacles to good quality exchanges.

(slide 3) A Syndrome means a set of concurrent things, such as emotions or actions, that usually form an identifiable pattern. This means it is predictable, under certain conditions. When we see signs of a syndrome, we can know that the rest of the signs are also likely to be there, just as the symptoms of a cold or flu generally fit together.

(slide 4) An Expatriate is simply the name for any person living in a foreign country. Bonding refers to the process of forming a close attachment, such as a close friendship. (slide 5) So if we look at the complete definition again, we can see the complete meaning: An almost universal tendency for Inbound students, and expatriates of any kind to gather together and become very close when living in a foreign country. And, the warning is – often this can be to the detriment of their ability to immerse effectively into the host culture.

(slide 6) Briefly, let’s review what we know about culture and culture shock. Culture is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of any given society. It refers to the total way of life, including how people think, feel and behave. (slide 7) Culture may be compared to an iceberg, floating in the sea. About 1/8<sup>th</sup> is above the surface, where we can see it, but 7/8ths are hidden below the surface. Conscious, overt behaviors like language, dress and food preferences are above the surface. Even these can be difficult to adjust to if they are very different from what we are accustomed to. But unconscious, hidden cultural values and behaviors which make up the larger part of culture, can be very difficult to deal with, because we do not see them, and may only be vaguely aware of them, in an uncomfortable sort of way.

(slide 8) Confronting conscious and unconscious cultural differences almost inevitably leads to culture shock, the profound sense of disorientation and discomfort that comes with extended travel or living in a foreign culture, markedly different from one’s own. (slide 9) Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. (slide 10) These signs are the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: (slide 11) when to shake hands, what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. What to eat and how to eat it.

(slide 12 Blank) My good friend Raul Herrera from Mexico tells the story of his first night in the USA. He was 14 years old, sent to military school, as was the tradition in his family, speaking not one word of English. After a difficult trip, with many mistakes in directions, he ended up that night in his dormitory, exhausted, without any food. He walked to a grocery store that was still open and searched the aisles until

he saw what was familiar – a box with a picture of a fresh hot apple pie. So he bought the box of “apple pie” and took it back to his dormitory, and for supper ate a frozen, uncooked apple pie. Because all the normal signs were unfamiliar, he looked for the cues for what he thought was familiar, and got a big surprise. He concluded that was the way Americans ate Apple Pie!

### Slides about mistakes in English

(Slide 13) These cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions or other customs, are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which are unconsciously learned. (slide 14) When an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will we may be, a series of props have been knocked from under us.

(slide 15) This is followed by a feeling of frustration and anxiety. People react to this frustration in much the same way. First they reject the environment which causes the discomfort: They think "the ways of the host country are bad because they make us feel bad." (slide 16) That last sentence is worth looking at again: "the ways of the host country are bad because they make us feel bad." (as one exchange student put it rather directly (slide 17) “Culture Shock takes me outside my comfort zone.” Or as American humorist Clifton Fadiman says (slide 18) When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable. And as if people are surprised to find that people in foreign countries actually do things differently, Canadian author Margaret Atwood reminds us (slide 19) “Some travelers want to go to foreign places but are dismayed when the places turn out actually to be foreign.”

(slide 20) So it is only natural that when confronted with all of these difficult differences, Inbounds will look for anything or anyone that will help them feel more comfortable. This can be a fellow countryman, but it can be and often is anyone from anyplace who is also a foreigner. (slide 21) And what do Inbounds have in common? They are all from somewhere else, They are all going through basically the same experience, They are likely to be critical of similar things in the host culture, They are very sympathetic to one another, They feel “instant” acceptance, and For the most part, they all speak English.

(Slide 22) It may also help for us to review for a moment, the predictable stages of culture shock, because it is not just one single event. The stages of culture shock include Initial enthusiasm and excitement, Irritability and negativism, Gradual adjustment and adaptation, and Integration and bi-culturalism. (Slide 23) But let’s look at these again, especially stage two: Irritability and negativism. This can come very early, and very quickly, or it can gradually develop. But it always relates to the earlier slide where I noted the idea that (slide 24) "the ways of the host country are bad because they make us feel bad." There is probably nothing wrong with the ways of the host culture – except that they make us feel uncomfortable.

So what are some real examples (slide 25) of irritability and negativism? How about these statements? Why don’t they **ever** hug or touch one another? Or, why do they **always** hug and touch one another? Why don’t they make their street signs easier to read? If they mean “no” why don’t they say “no”? Why don’t they just tell me what something costs? Why can’t anyone stand in line? Why do they drive so fast? Why do they need so much stuff? (material goods) Why don’t they do something about their poor? Etc., etc., etc.

Why why why? We only ask these questions because we are uncomfortable. We are not really asking for information!

(black screen) I can tell you from personal experience that the pain of going through culture shock and the temptations of the Inbound Syndrome are real. Over 40 years ago I was an American Peace Corps Volunteer in Iran. The Peace Corp is a program where Americans volunteer to go to another country for two or three years and provide whatever service the host country asks for. I taught English as a second language. Back then I had never heard of anything like the Inbound Syndrome, or even culture shock. But for some reason that I cannot really explain to this day, I sensed that if I was going to really become a part of the Iranian culture, I had to get as far away from other Americans, and all foreigners as I could. I asked for an assignment in a remote village, 2,000 people, in the central desert, five hours by oil tank truck from the nearest city, no electricity, no running water, no restaurants and NO ONE spoke English.

There were no telephones, tv, and only a portable short wave radio that gave me one hour of English programming on the BBC per night. I got pretty lonely, and had some difficult moments, but I learned Farsi better than most of my fellow Americans, and I learned to adapt to the culture more quickly than most. By the way, I also didn't have to work at letting go of ties with family and friends back home. The only communication was by regular mail, and a round trip letter took about 16 days. I tell you this not to hold myself up as some great example, but to explain that I lived these experiences. I suppose I could be considered a fossil – so old that I have turned to stone. Many people have told me I am trying to swim against the current when I talk this way. But I also know that there are many Youth Exchange students who have similar awareness of their desire to get as far in to the host culture as they can. They may not know any more why than I did, but they naturally gravitate toward this kind of experience. It is my belief that if we inform ourselves and students of these concepts, more of them will choose to do those things that may not be immediately comfortable, but things that will eventually allow them a deeper and more rewarding experience. So, back to that Irritability and Negativism stage.

(slide 26) If the easiest response to the Irritability and negativism stage is to find comfort with other Inbounds or electronically with friends and family back home, the student may get stuck going back and forth from stage one to two, again and again. (slide 27) Another way to look at this is to see that falling back from irritability to a more comfortable stage can keep us going in a circle, as indicated by the red arrows which show the person going around and around, but never pushing through the irritability stage to the real growth stage, of gradual adaptation. (slide 28) and it is really only at that stage that real enculturation happens. It is where the successful adoption of the behavior patterns and customs of the surrounding culture occurs. Enculturation is also called also called acculturation, immersion, assimilation and adaptation. It all means basically the same thing – the hard work it takes to really learn to fit in.

(slide 29) We also know that as adjustment to culture shock progresses in the course of an exchange year, the personal sense of accomplishment increases dramatically. This chart shows a typical, but not exact, progression of culture shock over time. The months are show from pre-departure through return. The bottom yellow line shows the level of normal feelings people have when they feel “OK”. The red line shows how up and down the feelings of an exchange student can be. If we follow the line, we see that the initial level of excitement goes up through all of the new and wonderful experiences when we first visit a new country. But sooner or later we “hit a wall” or as we say in the United States, “the honeymoon is over”. we are no longer tourists, or guests in our host family. We LIVE here and these people do things their way ALL THE TIME! If students can stick with the enculturation stage and develop the skills and understanding

they need to function well, in that long slow adaptation phase, (slide 30) they get a “high” feeling that is much higher than the initial excitement of the first stage. This is the satisfaction of conducting business in the host country language, of solving problems with host families and friends using the customs of the host country and of being at peace with doing things very differently from the way one would at “home”, or what we used to call home.

(slide 31) So once again, under the stress of culture shock, it is very tempting to turn to other Inbounds, just as it is very tempting to turn to friends and family back home, for understanding and support. The risk of that easy comfort however is possibly limiting the extent to which we really become enculturated. Some students seem to sense this naturally. Some learn it early on from experience. Some take our advice and take care not to let the easy bonding with other inbounds become a substitute for real adaptation. How do we know when a student is successfully managing the inbound syndrome? (slide 32) Here are some examples: The student who insists that people speak in the host country language, even when very difficult, The student who voluntarily restricts internet and text messaging to a few hours a week, The student who first goes to host parents and the local RYE officer with problems, rather than someone back home (slide 33) The student who volunteers in a local orphanage or other service project, on their own, and the student who speaks with other Inbounds in the host country language, rather than in English.

(slide 34) How do we know when YEOs are helping their students successfully manage the Inbound Syndrome? Here are some examples: When they explain the Inbound Syndrome to students early in their stay, when they challenge them to voluntarily manage contact with other Inbounds, when they limit the number of Inbounds in any one club or school, (slide 35) When they limit the number of Inbound gatherings, when they limit unofficial gathering of Inbounds, and when they insist Inbounds speak the host country language at Inbound events.

(slide 36) Now you may say, aren't these things any good YEO already knows and does to help make a successful exchange? Well yes – and no. (36a) Sometimes we get caught up in our own good feelings when we see Inbounds bonding – we get what I call the Model United Nations feeling. And this is a nice feeling to have every once in a while. (36b) And sometimes we confuse a good time with a good experience. A good time is when a student is happy and being entertained. A good experience is when a student is learning, through hard work, and becoming a better, more skilled person. Sometimes it is impossible to have a good time when having a good experience.

(slide 37) Remember WE can see the pattern ahead of time – the SYNDROME. We know from experience it is likely to happen. We can resist the temptation to satisfy our own need to feel good when we know it will lead to greater growth for the students.

(slide 38) Now in all fairness, there are some good and even desirable things about Inbound Bonding. It really does promote international goodwill and understanding, very visibly. Inbounds can be support to one another and can give useful advice about adapting. Watching the enthusiasm and emotions of Inbounds together is highly motivating and helps promote our program. (slide 39) Inbounds do need to gather for orientations, tours and district conferences. And it makes just about everyone involved with the program feel good. I never get tired of watching students in a parade of flags, and I get tears in my eyes, no matter how many times I see it. So, contrary to what some people have misunderstood in my message, I am not opposed to Inbound gatherings – they will happen. My main message is (slide 40) Inbound Bonding or the

Inbound Syndrome cannot and should not be eliminated. It should be understood and managed. We owe it to our students to address this openly and not just ignore it.

(slide 41) Why? Why is this important? In its extreme form, the Inbound Syndrome can ruin an exchange. In moderation it can enrich an exchange. (slide 42) And the students who understand and manage the Inbound Syndrome create the possibility of truly amazing, outstanding quality exchanges. But it takes a conscious effort and hard work. (slide 43) Let's challenge our students to not just have a good exchange – but instead to have a great exchange. I think we owe them the opportunity. (slide 44) I thank you for your kind attention and patience. And I especially want to thank the interpreters who are probably relieved that I am just about finished with this speech. Thank you. This presentation, the Powerpoint and the written text may be found on [www.yeoresources.org](http://www.yeoresources.org). And finally, my thanks again to the organizers of this conference for all of their hard work on behalf of Rotary Youth Exchange.