

Independence Day and American Values

July 3, 2013

Those of you based in the U.S. are undoubtedly preparing to celebrate American Independence Day by getting together with family and friends for picnics, parades, flag waving and, of course, fireworks. But have you ever stopped to consider the impact Independence Day has had on American cultural values?

Let's start with the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence which states "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" This sentence alone has provided the foundation for two core American values: **freedom and equality**.

Consider the importance of the word "freedom" in American cultural lexicon. From the politicized debate on Constitutional rights to the fierce patriotism displayed by many Americans, *freedom* encompasses other core American values such as independence, self-determination, and choice. Americans tend to respect one's ability to work out problems oneself without requesting the help of others. Indeed, asking for help can be perceived as a sign of weakness. There is a belief that self-reliance, determination and taking initiative demonstrates strength and leads to success.

Freedom of choice is yet another value frequently taken for granted. From the mundane, such as selecting among multiple food options in a restaurant to finding 25 different brands of cat food in the supermarket to more important areas such as going back to school to change professions mid-career, many Americans are bombarded with small and large choices on a daily basis. It's important to take into consideration that in societies that provide limited choice to their citizens, people may have a more difficult time embracing change or taking risks, both of which are closely linked to this value.

Finally, consider how the value of equality plays out in American lives. From a stress on informal communication and management styles to the meritocracy-based workforce where hard work often leads to promotion regardless of other qualifications, there is an underlying principle in equal opportunity for all. The value of equality also fosters many laws, such as the Equal Employment Opportunities Act (EEOA) that enforces laws against workplace discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc.

So as you get ready for the festivities this week, take a few moments to reflect on ways that Independence Day (or other important national holidays if you're not American) has influenced your values and impacted expectations you bring to your work.

Happy 4th of July.