

The following material has recently been used to great success with management and leadership teams. If you'd like to learn more, please review our Programs and contact us at www.leadershiptransformationgroup.com



The Importance of Cultural Competency

It is commonplace in every social service and non-profit agency to have issues of cultural competency that all staff wish to address and improve upon. This is no less true here at this organization. The cultural competency questions most common in a non-profit agency such as yours include: Are people across racial and ethnic differences able to comfortably disagree with each other? Are all levels of staff comfortable with hiring and promotion procedures? Are men and women comfortable in working closely with each other? Are straights and lesbians and gays?

That said there is all the more reason for this company to perform at a higher standard. It is of vital importance that an accreditation agency such as yours, intimately involved with helping other agencies change and improve, be an environment for discussion, no matter how painful or difficult, with the objective of supplanting mistrust with trust, and resentment with improved morale. Only in such an environment can concerns be raised without labeling or blame being measured.

To create the building blocks of communication, you must first remove the stumbling blocks. Here are a few. They will serve as additional "Conditions of Workability" as we move forward in this work. The stumbling blocks we commit to limit are:

1. **Characterizing statements as based on intentional bias or prejudice, etc.** Accusations should be always be avoided, as should terms like "racist," "sexist," "hypocrite," etc. Avoid sentences that solicit anger: "You are an ___ist or an ___ite."
2. **Responding without understanding.** If you disagree with another's statement, first ask for clarification before responding.
3. **Reproaching instead of respectfully disagreeing.** If you still find a statement problematic, reframe it in terms of "if you said..., then it comes across to me as a problem because ..." Then state the reasons you feel this way.

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4. **Ranking oppression.** Strive to respect differences in experience without creating a “hierarchy of oppression. E.g., one form of bias, discrimination, or oppression is automatically worse than another.
5. **Belittling a concern.** No two people experience the same thing exactly the same way.
6. **Adding fuel to fire.** There is nothing wrong with a heated discussion, but an attitude intended to inflame will be counterproductive.

Equally important, it is not possible to cover the range of issues touched upon under the rubric of cultural competence. What we can and will do is provide three of the prongs necessary for directors and supervisors to be culturally competent enough to work with their staffs on issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and other social dynamics in a way that builds unity rather than tension.

Your First Experience with “Difference”

We have learned that an effective way to begin addressing how to develop cultural competency as a skill and not a cause is not by a list of complaints or issues that increase emotions. Instead, we want you all to begin well before you were employed here at this agency—way back to when you were a child.

We therefore wish you to start by getting into small groups and discussing the following:

The first time that you as a child—before the age of ten—experienced “difference.” Within your group go on to discuss the following:

1. How old were you?
2. What was the setting?
3. What was your response to feeling different?
4. What effect, if any, did this experience have on you later in your life?

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Implications to this discussion:

1. While there are exceptions, almost all of us first remember “difference” as a negative experience. **Most of us remember “difference” as a negative experience. A telling moment in which the world’s axis shifted and altered our perspective. That moment of difference may have revealed your skin as darker than your classmates’, or it may have shown that of your peers you’re the only one who has to translate English for her parents. Difference may have revealed your attraction to persons of the same sex, or perhaps that your love of basketball would remain unrequited because you’re too small to make team.**
2. We almost always do not know how to respond to the experience, except with confusion, fear, and by feeling isolated. These first experiences are the foundation of a social psychological response of awkwardness and unconscious fear to difference that is separate from any cultural connotations (that may be and are added later). **So quite often, we all begin our cognitive understanding of difference as a barrier between us and the proverbial “others” with whom we work today. Indeed, often “difference” translates into “not good enough,” “not fitting in.” It is no surprise, then, that we almost always respond with confusion, fear and feelings of isolation. Understandably, our perceived “difference” may be the source of lifelong patterns of behavior-- for instance, mistrusting White authority figures, dismissing or diminishing Black colleagues’ capacities and skills. Our training in cultural competence helps us understand how our particular moment of “difference” cast a light that can blind to the true intention of others.**
3. Our training in cultural competency helps us to understand how these powerful feelings of difference impact our behavior and to re-interpret actions in a new light. For example, awkwardness around “newness” and in new situations with unfamiliar connotations of appropriate behavior is to be expected. **When we develop this expectation we no longer have difficulty in becoming “anxious about being anxious!”**
4. **Understanding the power of difference helps us in our practice by becoming *comfortable with discomfort*.** We have done this work for years. It is always the most charged for us, and it will be for you when the issues come up inside an agency.

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If you feel uncomfortable, that is normal. By seeing it as normal, you can relax into the comfort of helping others become aware of this state as well, thus allowing everyone to move more easily to the substance of the topic or topics at hand.

The first prong of cultural competence: by recognizing that people’s first experience with difference created feelings of awkwardness, we do not flee that tension: over time, we practice becoming comfortable with discomfort—and thus help others stay with the issues as well.