

An Introduction to Cultural Competency for Community Based Organizations

Cultural competence describes how we manage and operate within our organizations regarding the values and behaviors of each individual that foster effective cross cultural communication. Cultural competence can be reflected in the policies and practices of an organization. There is a continuum of cultural competence that ranges from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency.

A culturally proficient organization is one that values the people who work with and for it, understands the community in which it operates, and embraces its clients as valuable members of that community.

The culture of a culturally proficient organization promotes inclusiveness, institutionalizes the process of valuing and learning about differences and provides on-going staff development and accountability measures to continually improve upon the organization's level of cultural proficiency.

Cultural Competency Assessments

A cultural competency assessment is essential for CBOs for several reasons. When working with particular cultural groups, there are some unifying characteristics; but it is important to remember that there are also distinctive cultural trends within groups and subgroups. These trends are impacted by language and differences in dialect, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, geographic location, education, urban vs. rural living, and other factors that affect how individuals identify themselves. CBO staff may hold inaccurate perceptions or generalizations of cultural groups that could offend their clients. For example, African American clients who live in a low income housing project in Atlanta, GA may not speak, act, feel and think the same way as African American clients who have gone to graduate school and grew up in the suburbs. Although these two distinct groups may share some intergenerational similarities, we can't assume what these similarities are.

Organizations must complete a thorough (and community informed) assessment to effectively develop cultural knowledge of the population they are serving. Subsequently, in order to provide culturally competent and effective prevention services to any cultural group (e.g. African Americans, Latino, women, youth; men who have sex with men, substance using populations), organizations and individuals need to develop a strong working knowledge of the culture., utilizing both organizational and community based resources.

Steps that will support you in building your organization's internal cultural competency:

Step One: Clearly understand who you are

Define your personal beliefs, biases, attitudes and feelings toward different cultural groups that you work with or serve and from where these beliefs, biases, attitudes and feelings originate. An

understanding of your self-perception and how others perceive you can be very beneficial as well (Do others see or experience you differently than you see yourself?). Ensuring that you have considerable knowledge about the different cultural groups that you come in contact with (employees, volunteers, board members, etc) will increase your capacity to effectively work with different cultural groups (It is not expected that you know everything about every culture, but you have a wealth of insider information on various cultures in your community. Utilize them!)

Step Two: Clearly understand who the organization is

- Conduct a thorough examination of the organization's culture (there are lots of assessment tools available). This will raise questions such as:
- Who are we as a group, and why?
- How do we define culture?
- How many cultures and communication styles exist within our organization?
- What do we like about ourselves?
- What about our organization's culture is important to keep?
- What about our organization's culture is important to change?
- How does our culture affect those whom we serve?
- What could we do to change these things?
- What are we honestly willing to do?
- Where do we fall within the levels of cultural competency?

These are just a few of the types of reflective and open ended questions that will support your organization in conceptualizing office culture and its impact on your work.

Step Three: Institutionalize the value of cultural competency

Update your organization's mission or current strategic thinking to include cultural competency. Develop tools and check in procedures or language around success that compliments your current work!

Step Four: Document the commitment to cultural competency

Develop a set of values and principles, in writing that assist organizational staff in working cross culturally. It is important to create a common culture together, as an organization. Putting things in writing is a great way to ensure team accountability, rather than relying on memory, which diminishes the new office policies or procedures as great team ideas that are optional to implement.

Step Five: Make it easy to keep thinking about cultural competency

Create internal and external cultural competency assessment tools specific to your organization and the clients that are served. Periodically assess organizational cultural competency and address needs to increase culturally proficiency. Provide additional cultural competency or specific sensitivity training as needed or revealed by the organization's on-going assessments.

Conclusion

In order to be culturally proficient in the communities we serve, it is imperative that we develop our organization's internal cultural competence. Developing a culturally competent workplace and staff is an ongoing process. Organizational leadership needs to develop and maintain systems that will continually assess how the organizational culture is working, if diversity is being appreciated and celebrated, and identify new and creative ways to engage staff in ongoing competency training. We have to be diligent and unrelenting towards this goal because cultural competency is an ongoing organizational process that changes and evolves just like us! Remember to consider the following when thinking of groups to be inclusive of in your office culture:

- Language
- Age
- Gender Identification
- Sexual Orientation
- Race
- Culture
- Economic Status
- Education
- Geographic Location

There are a wealth of resources out there to help you get started on shifting your organization's policies and practices around cultural competence. We have only scratched the surface here. To dig a bit deeper into how to carry out some of the tips mentioned above, check out:

http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/Wu_takingcultcomptheoryaction_964.pdf

And be sure to continue visiting the Tabono CBA Website, as we will be posting more in-depth tips, strategies, and practical applications of cultural competence for you to utilize. Is there something that you read here that sparked your interest or highlighted a challenge your organization might be facing that you could use support with? That's what we're here for! Contact us to talk more in depth about how Tabono CBA can support your organization in being culturally proficient in the workplace and in the community!

For more information, contact Carnelius Quinn, CBA Specialist at: carnelius.quinn@etr.org or (415) 252-0402 x608.