



Cultural Competence: What Does It Mean for You?

It's a skill your employees need to learn. Make sure you're up to speed.

By Julia Epstein

What spurs success in a nonprofit organization? The way you achieve full inclusion for all members of your constituency is one critical element. To include everyone, no matter their race, ethnicity, native language, sexual or gender orientation and expression, disability, age, class, or religion requires that all staffers, from the executive director to the receptionist, be able to interact comfortably and appropriately with every person in your community. Nonprofit organizations should be *of* their communities, not just *in* them.

What is cultural competence?

Put simply, to be culturally competent means to understand your own worldview in such a way that you can share and understand the ethos and mores of others. It means accepting difference, seeing everyone as unique and valuable, and respecting everyone's beliefs and traditions without judgment. It means recognizing when misunderstanding or conflict relates to cultural miscommunication.

What skills do you and your employees need?

Having the right skills can mean speaking your clients' language, whether that's Vietnamese or American Sign Language. Or it can mean understanding that getting your constituents to community meetings entails ensuring bus service and childcare and planning your budget accordingly. It can mean knowing it's offensive to refer to a person with quadriplegia as "wheelchair-bound," and it can mean appreciating what foods will appeal to your Filipino audience at a reception.

Depending on your clients and the ways you serve them, your staff needs different kinds — and degrees — of cultural competence. If you coach English-language learners in a recreation program, sensitivity to their immigrant backgrounds, home life, language usage, and cultural beliefs is paramount. If you run a soup kitchen serving seniors, your staff must take the time to assist them and empathize with their concerns. If you provide vocational training for people with intellectual disabilities, your staff must treat each client with dignity and know how to communicate appropriately. If you offer medical care for people with HIV/AIDS, being judgmental about sexual practices or substance use won't win your constituents' trust.

Cultural competence is a process that evolves over time and must be nurtured and rewarded. It's a crucial feature of your organization's capacity to carry out its mission. Training your staff in areas that affect your constituency can build greater capacity in your organization and establish community trust.

Take as an example a less commonly thought of group, the disability community. Many able-bodied people lack experience with those who use mobility devices, sign language, white canes, or service animals, or who have cognitive or psychiatric disabilities, and feel uneasy interacting with a person who has a disability. Beyond being told "don't stare" as children, most people have never thought about disability as a culture. And because disability is an equal-opportunity minority group, and the largest one at that, it frightens people.

So here are some basic and by no means exhaustive tenets of disability cultural competency:

- **Be respectful by using "person first" language:** a "person who has epilepsy," not an "epileptic."
- **Avoid negative terms:** handicapped, cripple, victim, sufferer, invalid, special, defective.
- **Don't talk about people with disabilities as "brave," "courageous," or "inspiring."** They're just living their lives, not being superheroes.
- **Make eye contact** when you speak to a person with a disability.
- **Introduce yourself by name and role** to people who are blind or visually impaired, and don't distract or pet their service animal.
- **Remember** that people who use wheelchairs, scooters, or other mobility devices aren't "confined" or "bound"; their devices enable them to travel independently.

Who needs the most training?

The receptionist who greets everyone at the door is on the front lines of client communication, whereas back-office staff focused on keeping your server humming or the books balanced may interact with clients less frequently. But in the long run, if you're to be successful, everyone at your organization should share your mission and values, respect the community they're part of, and understand the cultural complexities of the work they do. Social change is attitude change, and it pays to begin at home. ■

Articles in this department are written by the staff and members of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (www.allianceonline.org).

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