

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?

Dealing with diversity is one of your biggest challenges. Here's advice from the field.



By Ramon Del Castillo & John Zalenski

Nonprofits are facing a crisis. They're falling behind in meeting the needs of increasingly diverse communities. As they struggle to become more multicultural, they're discovering that what's needed is a radically new approach.

This new way of thinking raises many challenges. How do you reconcile cultures whose basic premises and values clash? How do you show respect for beliefs unheard of in your philosophy? What if these different views conflict with management ideas ingrained in your organization? Is there a way to accommodate both without sacrificing the integrity of either? How do you address the suspicion, anxiety, and conflicts that arise as you incorporate unconventional elements into your organization?

A pioneering program in Denver addresses these questions and offers valuable guidelines for other nonprofits.

A Journey of Innovation Begins

The story begins in 1974, when the Southwest Denver Community Mental Health Center had to face the fact that its services weren't very relevant or effective for many of the Mexican-Americans and other Spanish-speaking groups in its

"Sometimes the community is the expert."

vicinity. To solve the problem, the center created a bilingual team to develop strategies for meeting this population's needs. The team was later transformed into a clinic under the mental health center's auspices.

As part of this effort, the team, led by **Dr. Ernesto Alvarado**, took the unprecedented step of hiring a *curandera* – a healer in Chicano communities who takes a holistic approach to physical, psychosocial, and spiritual conditions. *Curanderismo*, the art and science of indigenous Mexican and Indian healing, uses rituals, prayers, symbols, herbs, and massage for healing purposes. Alvarado's proposal, bringing *curanderismo* into a publicly funded health center, was the first of its kind.

Diana Velazquez, the first *curandera* to join the team, who went on to become manager of the clinic, had been practicing *curanderismo* in Mexican *barrios*, working in a sort of underground networking system. The center was able to take advantage of her skills because it had already implemented

an innovative personnel system.

Dr. Paul Polak, executive director of the center at the time, describes this personnel system as "based on output rather than degrees." The managers defined tasks and then hired the best person for each job, regardless of formal credentials, providing training to fill in gaps in needed skills. Because of this flexible structure, it was possible to look beyond Velazquez's lack of formal training and appreciate the value of her extensive experience and ability to work with people. Following a training regimen, Velazquez was able to blend concepts of community mental health and her Indian/Mexican/Chicano heritage into a well rounded approach to healing.

The clinic was barely up and running before referrals began to pour in. Clientele from a variety of ethnic and racial groups — far beyond the population for which the program was originally intended — requested services. Clearly, this new approach was desperately needed.

As the clinic's leaders struggled to turn their vision into reality, they confronted the same problems every nonprofit faces when incorporating cultural issues into innovation.

You can use their hard-earned lessons in your own journey of cultural change. Here are the keys.

Choose Flexible Management Philosophies

The center's successes can be traced to the management philosophies of the three main players — executive director Dr. Paul Polak, team manager Dr. Ernesto Alvarado, and *curandera* Diana Velazquez. All three see themselves as pragmatists, solving problems by finding what works.

These three leaders agree that clients are best served when they're part of the planning. As Polak says, "Sometimes the community is the expert." Today, Polak continues this management style in his work with one-acre farmers in Asia. After he talks to the farmers and implements their solutions, "people say we are innovative," Polak observes with a smile. "But is that innovative, or is it just stupid not to talk to the people?"

Polak thinks the key to organizational success is a democratic, decentralized style of management. Top managers should be involved in program development and then turn innovation over to the staff.

For innovation to work, Polak emphasizes, systems must be open and accessible. This approach widens the doors for the community to build trust with the organization's employees.

One of the management strengths Polak advocates is the ability to communicate "to ordinary people about an innovation." He feels that through dialogue, anything can be resolved. All three of the key players believe in solid communication as a tool for change.

Alvarado notes that one of his strongest assets as the team manager was his ability to converse professionally in the language of both psychiatry and *curanderismo*. His communication skills helped him form a strong team and deal with the differences in training that team members brought to the table.

Velazquez learned the more formal aspects of management through

Are You a Boundary Spanner?

Every culturally competent organization needs boundary spanners — people willing to straddle cultures and bring points of view together. Take this quiz to see if you have what it takes to be a boundary spanner. Give yourself a score from 1 (no, not at all) to 10 (yes, totally) for each question. Then think of ways you can stretch yourself to a 10 for as many questions as possible.

___ Do you care about people more than abstractions? Do you make friends outside your own culture? Do you enjoy listening to their stories and hearing about their lives?

___ Are you flexible, able to shift position swiftly to adjust to new circumstances?

___ Do you respect opinions very different from your own?

___ When something no longer works, are you able to abandon it and move on?

___ Do you often leave your comfort zone and seek out people who challenge your assumptions?

___ Are you a curious person, frequently taking courses, attending conferences, reading about new subjects, and learning new things?

___ Do you value communication highly, making an effort to learn all you can about verbal and nonverbal ways to communicate?

___ Do you practice conscious conversation, paying attention to how you speak and listen?

___ Are you willing to spend time patiently building relationships?

___ Do you consider cultural competency one of the most important issues your organization faces?

___ When making decisions, do you make a point of seeking out contrary advice?

___ Are you tolerant of the idiosyncracies and imperfections that are part of being human?

___ Do you take risks to initiate new ideas?

___ Are you a consensus builder and negotiator?

___ Do you listen more than you speak?

her longevity at the clinic, working under the supervision of a variety of executive directors and managers, all of whom used their management philosophies in administering clinical services, including *curanderismo*, to community residents. Velazquez sees culture as the basis for the clinic's success: "I think if the manager did not have a good cultural face that the clinic would die."

Weave Culture into the Planning

We can define cultural competency as a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that lets people work together efficiently in cross-cultural situations. Incorporating cultural

competency into the organization was one of the center's greatest challenges.

When a new element is introduced into an entrenched system, anxiety surfaces. In this case, the *curandera* needed to feel that her work would be respected, but she also had to conform, to a degree, to the regulations. In turn, those who were used to Western systems had to be supportive and adaptable. Finding a balancing point where the healer didn't feel compromised and the system remained legitimate was crucial.

Velazquez used cultural diagnostics to understand clients from

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Steps to Achieving Cultural Competency

Follow these steps to assure that your organization is culturally competent.

- **Assess your organization's level of cultural competency**, and build cultural issues into your plans (including marketing, budgeting, hiring, and strategic planning).
- **Be ready to resolve conflict** and deal head-on with the problems that come with innovation and a merging of different cultures.
- **Educate board and staff members** with practical seminars on cross-cultural understanding.
- **Practice a non-hierarchical management style** that gives people autonomy and holds them accountable.
- **Foster an organizational mindset** that puts value on risk-taking, innovation, and the introduction of new ideas.
- **Incorporate cultural competency** into your organization's mission and vision.
- **Create an organizational environment based on the cultural needs of the community you serve.** As much as possible, integrate their languages and customs into your surroundings so they feel comfortable, welcomed, and at home.
- **Hire people who are culturally sensitive.** Build questions into your interview process to assure that employees are willing to accept beliefs outside their own backgrounds. While not all employees need to be members of minority groups, they should be willing to learn about and embrace other cultures.
- **Invite comments from stakeholders** early in every project. Develop a feedback system that makes it easy for people to add their input.
- **Update your employee handbook and other communications** to include respect for other cultures as a core principle, and reinforce this idea in staff and board orientations.
- **Encourage teamwork** and communication throughout your organization.
- **Create a Web site** that integrates the languages and beliefs of different cultures and that is accessible to all.
- **Train people to speak respectfully with others.** Teach them, for example, to begin statements with "I" rather than "you," "he," "she," or "they" to avoid a perception of blaming.
- **Use a communication campaign** to hear the voices of the community and explain the reasons for changes you're making. Talk to the community's formal and informal leaders.
- **Put a system in place to evaluate outcomes** and document your effectiveness. Solid proof and tangible measures of success help bring legitimacy.
- **Remember that innovation invites innovation.** If you encourage creativity throughout your organization, you'll have an easier time introducing new ideas related to cultural competency.

required to speak Spanish. But there was always someone on hand with a knowledge of the Spanish language and, whenever possible, the colloquial vernacular.

Employees' ethnicity wasn't as important as their cultural sensitivity. Team members didn't need to believe in the art of *curanderismo*, but they did need to support it as a viable method of healing. For this to occur, the team manager had to hire people who were open to learning.

Power can be a vicious animal; its harnessing, however, can be a valuable tool.

The team also paid attention to cultural details in planning the environment. From the beginning, the clinic's ambience was culturally relevant to the community. It wasn't the sterile atmosphere that had historically kept Chicanos from entering treatment. Instead, the clinic provided cozy surroundings, including cultural artifacts that created a feeling of belonging for clients.

Velazquez describes it as "a small clinic that looks very much like a home." When you walk in, you can smell beans simmering and bacon frying, because someone's always cooking. When clients arrive, they're offered food and a cup of coffee and greeted in their own language.

Build Trusting Relationships

One of the cultural characteristics Velazquez champions is *personalismo*, the process of building relationships. She knew her relationships with others at the clinic were critical, since *curanderismo* deals with power (*poder*) at all levels. *Curanderas* know that power can be a vicious animal; its harnessing, however, can be a valuable tool.

The *curandera* must have a good working relationship with traditional healers. Both must be willing to venture into different

non-mainstream cultures. Mexican-Americans, for example, may believe their problems are caused by a hex, an evil eye, or a *trisia*, which Velazquez defines as a depression not only in the mind and body but in the soul. They may feel that only a *curandera* can heal such ills.

Velazquez describes one instance in which a client refused to take

psychiatric medication because she wasn't *loca* (crazy). Through a blending of culturally specific rituals designed by Velazquez as she communicated with her client, the client agreed to take the psychiatric medication mixed with a *remedio* (tea) and approved by the psychiatrist.

Not everyone at the clinic was

approaches and respect each other's abilities. Trust between the two types of healers is imperative. When Velazquez began at the clinic, she was careful to forge relationships with psychologists and psychiatrists, knowing the level of respect these Western healers possess. At the same time, she built trust with clients by using techniques laden with the values that Chicanos and Mexicanos carry as part of their cultures.

Outreach into the community was an important strategy. Realizing that penetrating the Chicano community was vital, Polak structured a community advisory council that acted as a support system and information feeder during the innovation process. He encouraged staff to develop relationships with community residents and incorporate their input. This collaborative process of including the consumer as part of decision-making was focal in sustaining the *curanderismo* program.

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As the clinic's executive director, Polak believed that "playing politics" was important in gaining support. He built political inroads with state decision-makers and was careful to let legislators know of the center's plans.

The trust Polak placed in Alvarado and Velazquez was another pivotal tactic. Delegating authority to those with the cultural competency to handle this innovation strengthened the relationship between the clinic and the central administration.

The three leading participants all note the importance of a strong monitoring process. It was essential to amass hard evidence to convince critics they knew what they were doing. As Alvarez points out,

trust begins with proof that your theories actually work.

Manage Conflict

The accounts of the three key participants in this case study show that managers must be willing to challenge the status quo and not shy away from their visions. Innovation involves risk-taking and conflict, and sometimes controversial issues are never fully resolved. Effective leaders are able to deal with resistance and communicate effectively with resisters.

It's important to manage conflict in a way that reduces stress on the organization. This can include an educational process wherein critics become more knowledgeable and accepting of an innovation. *Curanderismo* was so foreign a concept to many that educating people was essential. In-service training modules were used to provide cross-cultural training to board, staff, and key players both within and outside the organization.

Polak, Velazquez, and Alvarado all became boundary spanners for the organization. They talked to community residents to receive their input and visited with naysayers to explain the rationale for the changes being made. All three possessed the skills to span different cultures, including the ability to speak with people in ways they understood. Whenever cultures come together, such boundary spanners are essential in reducing conflict and setting a tone of respect between people with different views. ■

References

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Continue Your Journey

For more specifics on becoming culturally competent, see these *Nonprofit World* resources at www.snpo.org:

- **Beyond Diversity** (Vol. 18, No. 2)
- **Managers Must Become Multicultural** (Vol. 20, No. 6)
- **Creating an Inclusive Workforce** (Vol. 24, No. 4)
- **Make Your E-Mails, Web Site, and Faxes Culturally Aware** (Vol. 20, No. 3)
- **What Followers Want from Leaders: Capitalizing on Diversity** (Vol. 25, No. 5)
- **Cultural Competence: What Does It Mean for You?** (Vol. 26, No. 5)
- **Breaking Down Barriers for People with Disabilities** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **Designing for Web Accessibility** (Vol. 21, No. 4)
- **The Failure of Diversity Training** (Vol. 18, No. 3)
- **How to Use Your Organizational Culture as a Competitive Tool** (Vol. 20, No. 2)
- **Diversity Is an International Issue** (Vol. 16, No. 4)
- **Opinion Surveys Uncover Cultural Preferences** (Vol. 17, No. 2)

Ramon Del Castillo (delcastr@mscd.edu) is chair and associate professor of the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department at Metropolitan State College in Denver. John Zalenski is a professor, researcher, and public analyst for child welfare programs. This article, adapted from Ramon Del Castillo's doctoral dissertation in the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado at Denver, is based on interviews he conducted in 1997.