

Increasing Cultural Proficiency in our Work Places

Cultural proficiency is a model for shifting the culture of an individual or an institution. It is a mind-set, a world view, a way that a person (or organization) makes decisions about effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments. It is a shift from viewing cultural difference as problematic to learning how to interact effectively with other cultures (Lindsey et al, 2009, p. 4).

Often, when we are confronted with people who are somehow different to ourselves, there is a natural tendency to suggest that either our beliefs, traditions and customs are wrong, or else those belonging to the other group are. This distinction between “us” and “them” creates a group of individuals who is viewed as “other” than us. They aren’t like us, *they* are different. When we engage in “othering” behaviours, we build stereotypes around the ways in which “they” are different from ourselves. These stereotypes may be built from the characteristics of one person’s difference and then spread to include *everyone* that has characteristics that are similar. Over time, engaging in “othering” behaviour creates cultural monoliths wherein anyone who identifies with a culture, a faith, a gender, and so forth is stereotyped according to these generalized characteristics.

These stereotypes that develop may be addressed through active pursuit of **cultural proficiency**. Cultural proficiency enables individuals within systems to respond effectively to people who differ from one another. People and organizations that view cultural difference as something to overcome are often surprised that it is *they* who have to change in order to be effective in cross-cultural situations.

The Barriers

Cross (1989) provided three caveats of which we must be mindful as we work together to create an environment that is more welcoming of diversity. These are:

- ⌚ The presumption of entitlement
- ⌚ Systems of oppression
- ⌚ Unawareness of the need to adapt (or make modifications to practice)

When people believe that all the societal benefits and personal achievements that have been accrued are solely based on merit and the quality of character, this is referred to as the **presumption of entitlement**. It often makes people blind to the barriers experienced by those who are culturally different from themselves. **Systems of oppression and privilege** are the forces in society that affect an individual due to their membership in a distinct cultural group. Oppression doesn’t have to be enacted by individuals through acts of prejudice, but is often a function of systemic policies and practices. Resistance to change is often the result of an **unawareness of the need to adapt**. Many people do not recognize the need to make personal and organizational changes in response to the diversity of the people with whom they and their organizations interact. Rather, they believe that the “others” need to change and adapt to the existing ways.

When we apply these three barriers to our work with Low German speaking Mennonites, we quickly realize the number of ways in which our organizations are not friendly and welcoming toward this culture. For example, while we recognize the barrier of language, are we as aware of the narrow and often punitive view of attendance policies, documentation expectations, and other institutionalized norms, especially in relation to the transnational migration of families between Ontario and Latin America?

Cultural proficiency responds to these barriers with a moral framework for doing their work. We must become more aware of the influence of the dominant culture around us. Consider these guiding principles:

- ⌚ People are served to varying degrees by the dominant culture.

- ⌚ The group identity of individuals is as important as their individual identities.
- ⌚ Diversity within cultures is vast and significant.
- ⌚ Each group has unique cultural needs.
- ⌚ Marginalized, and minoritized (McCarthy, 2002), populations are expected to be at least bicultural; this status creates a distinct set of issues to which the system must be prepared to respond.
- ⌚ Inherent in cross-cultural interactions are dynamics that must be acknowledged, adjusted to, and accepted (Lindsey et al, 2009, p.6).

Necessary steps

There are five elements of cultural proficiency that help to provide the standards for individual values and behaviour toward diversity within organizations. They include:

- ⌚ **Assess culture** – Identify the differences among the people in the environment.
- ⌚ **Value diversity** – Embrace the differences as contributing to the “flavour” and the value of the environment, what makes it special.
- ⌚ **Manage the dynamics of difference** – Reframe the differences so that diversity isn’t viewed as a problem to be solved.
- ⌚ **Adapt to diversity** – Teach and learn about differences and how to respond to them sensitively and effectively.
- ⌚ **Institutionalize cultural knowledge** – Change the systems to ensure healthy and effective responses to diversity.

The Culturally Proficient Professional

What follows is a description of the culturally proficient behaviour of a professional, using the five elements listed above. How would these behaviours be reflective of someone in your institution or profession?

Assesses Culture: The culturally proficient professional is aware of her own culture and the effect it has on the people in her work setting. She learns about the culture of the organization and the cultures of the clients, and she anticipates how these cultures will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.

Values Diversity: The culturally proficient professional welcomes a diverse group of clients into the work setting and appreciates the challenges that diversity brings. He shares this appreciation with clients and co-workers, developing a learning community with them.

Manages the Dynamics of Difference: The culturally proficient professional recognizes that conflict is a normal and natural part of life. She develops skills to manage conflict in a positive way. She also helps clients to understand that what appears to be a clash in personality may in fact be a conflict in culture. Identifying the source of the conflict opens up beneficial learning opportunities for both parties.

Adapts to Diversity: The culturally proficient professional commits to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues that cause difference. He enhances the substance and structure of his work so that all of it is informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency.

Institutionalizes Cultural Knowledge: The culturally proficient professional works to influence the culture of her organization so that its policies and practices are informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency (see above). She takes advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge with colleagues, managers, clients and the communities from which they come. She creates opportunities for these groups to learn about one another, to engage in ways that honour who they are, and to challenge them to be more.

Reference:

Lindsey, R., Robins, K.N., & Terrell, R.D. (2009). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.