

BEYOND CULTURAL DIVERSITY: MOVING ALONG THE ROAD TO DELIVERING CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT: The key to delivering culturally competent services to the children and families we care for lies in accepting that just being "diverse" is not enough, and that we never really can become fully culturally competent. We, as individuals and agencies, must accept that cultural competence lies at the end of a road on which we should constantly be moving forward by learning about others and accepting how our potential biases and strong core values might affect our ability to be culturally competent. This paper looks at some of the key questions we should be asking to assist in helping us move along the road to cultural competence while acknowledging some of the obstacles and challenges along this road. The paper presents a model to aid in the quest to continue to be more diverse and accepting of diversity, and at the same time using the journey on the road to cultural competence to achieve the most important goal: how to link the diversity and the achieved level of cultural competence to the delivery of more culturally competent services to children and families

Key words: cultural competence, cultural diversity, organizational culture, stereotyping, prejudices, self reflection, risk taking

INTRODUCTION

With the current workforce crisis impacting virtually every area of our society, it is more imperative than ever that human service organizations not become content with just being diverse, but place a high priority on that crucial, and continuing, journey toward providing culturally competent services. With so many emerging pressures related to the workforce crisis, it might become very tempting for an agency to look at their "numbers" or their "improved snapshot" and place the process of cultural competence lower down their list of priorities. Agencies must be willing to accept that the road to delivering culturally competent services is intricately linked to developing a culturally competent staff. That road entails a constant process of self-evaluation and self-reflection by staff members and agency executives regarding their journey toward cultural competence. It also entails the emergence of an organizational culture that reflects true cultural competence and not merely cultural diversity. For most agencies, the journey has distinct periods. The road to cultural competence may start from a desire to have equality in terms of opportunity for all those in the agency. It may then move on to the realization that a more diverse workforce will bring many benefits including increased credibility in the community, higher staff morale, and a richness of ideas contributed by the

developing diversity. However, the most crucial part of the journey to cultural competence, and often the most difficult, is being truly able to intimately connect the process to agency services.

On Color and Ethnicity

When people are asked to introduce themselves and identify their cultural background, the vast majority simply refer to their ethnicity. There is much variety and richness in their answers as people refer to Italian, Italian-American, African-American, Black, West Indian, Korean, and so on. But culture is more than just ethnicity. It refers to family make-up, description of our childhood communities, the traditions we adhere to, tastes in music and literature, food preferences, and much more. Yet people tend to revert easily to using color as the primary factor determining culture. Agencies and workers must remind themselves constantly of the tendency to see diversity or culture as their interpretation of color and work to build a more comprehensive view.

Assumptions About Cultural Diversity

For agencies or workers to truly be able to approach cultural competence, they must create an atmosphere in which the following assumptions are addressed and debated:

The United States (your country?) is a meritocracy. Are we really a society or are we an agency where people achieve on merit. What is our definition of "merit", and how might that affect our service. How easily do we fall prey to judging a child's or a family's worth based on our past life history and accomplishments. We must be self-reflective and assess whether we may be giving a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps message.

America (your country) doesn't have a culture. We hold out the offer, "Give us your tired, your hungry, and your poor," but then we find many immigrants in situations where they are in dire need of our social programs. We need to address the merits of being a culture that, by mission, is a conglomeration of cultures, and examine the extent to which we truly welcome people from different cultures. We also need to address to what extent our agencies not only accept diversity of client populations but also work to integrate some of the diverse cultures into the dominant agency culture.

If it is different, it is wrong. Just where is that line that divides different and wrong. We often will tend to say that something that is different is not wrong--it is just that we do not understand it. But getting on the road to cultural competence entails digging deep into our stomachs and souls to come in touch with where different does become wrong in our value base. Is murder wrong. Child abuse. Something against our deep religious beliefs. If we assess and evaluate these questions, we will have difficulty in seeing the differences as just different and not wrong. We should seek support in supervision, from peers, and from taking the time to be truly self-reflective about our capability of remaining in a professional mode.

One should be extra careful when talking about cultural diversity. The agency intent on approaching cultural competence must create the kind of tolerant environment in which a mistake that is politically incorrect is OK and can be recouped through open process. Golden opportunities to grow are missed if this issue is not faced.

One should never admit to being prejudice. Acknowledging that we all have prejudices is one thing. Identifying them is much riskier, yet much richer in terms of learning and growing into cultural competence.

The Right Attitude

In her writings, Monica McGoldrick professes that some of the biggest problems in doing our work are issues in the social structures that make it difficult to improve our ability to overcome our ignorance. She identifies these issues as culture, race, class, and gender. She points out that merely disapproving of those social structures and systems is not enough to positively change them (McGoldrick, 1998, p.152). McGoldrick feels the strength of the 1960's Civil Rights movement was based on an attitude of collaboration (McGoldrick, 1998, p. 64). I believe the only way we can have a truly effective collaboration is by first examining ourselves and acknowledging our mistakes, prejudices, biases, stereotypes, and core beliefs. We need to look at how these make us who we are. To approach cultural competence, we need to be willing to risk sharing these issues with others in our attempt to grow in a spirit of collaboration.

Stereotypes

Are all stereotypes bad? It is easy to accept yes as an answer and move on. We cannot decide that until we get a working definition of stereotype. How is stereotype different from a characteristic of our lives? This is one of the most crucial questions to answer when approaching cultural competence. We define stereotype as a belief about a group, or a person associated with that group, that is not backed by empirical data. Using this definition, we can conclude that all stereotypes are bad. Why, then, the fuss? If that definition is not used, agencies in which workers are free to discuss the nature of stereotypes--even the most offensive ones--would suffer the loss of large amounts of data that might be extremely helpful in the quest to learn enough about the characteristics of people to achieve the desired level of cultural competence. How do we uncover the data? We can create an atmosphere where it is OK to ask and to talk openly about stereotypes. Failure to take those risks leaves us patting ourselves on our backs about our "snapshot".

Barriers to Cultural Competence

Not risking the discussion about differentiating stereotypes from characteristics is only one manifestation of a barrier to cultural competence. Mikel Hogan-Garcia (1999, p. 44) points out that cultural competence can also be inhibited by language differences, by overt

discrimination, by stress, and by different perceptions of things such as personal space, eye contact, body smell, and body gestures. The idea of workers or agencies being fearful of being perceived as politically incorrect would need to be added to the potential barriers to moving positively on the road to cultural competence.

The Road to Cultural Competence

The road to cultural competence is just that, a road. To succeed in this quest it is necessary for an agency, or a worker, to accept that it is a constant process of self-reflection and to maintain an openness to learn. Along that road it is necessary to:

Respect individuals and differences of other cultures. Truly respecting means not just acknowledging the differences but appreciating them and being willing to integrate some of them into your own culture.

Have a thirst to learn. It is necessary to view people's diversity as a primary source of learning about them, ourselves, the services we provide, and life.

Be willing to deal with ambiguity. Although we are in a profession that clings to the historical value of process, we are living in an era of concrete compliance. Agencies have to comply where necessary, but not lose the ability to be comfortable with the ambiguity cultural differences entail.

Be willing to risk challenging the difference between stereotypes and valid characteristics of an individual's life. Do not miss out on potentially rich treatment information by not being willing to respectfully challenge stereotypes to see if they might actually be important characteristics of an individual child or a family's life style.

Have a sincere desire to understand and integrate cultural differences. Cultural competence cannot be faked, nor can it be motivated by political correctness or statistical considerations. Achieving cultural competence requires a sincere effort, not just a necessary one.

The motivation for cultural diversity must be rooted in the mission of the agency. The agency must be committed to delivering the best possible services to clients. Those services cannot be the best without an organizational culture and a staff motivated to be as culturally competent as possible.

Address the question of when "different" becomes "wrong". The road to cultural competence entails looking within ourselves in order to identify our strong value biases. Ensuring competent services entails thoughtful self-reflection and/or utilizing other professional resources.

Conclusion

With the current workforce crisis, agencies must be careful not to push the journey along the road to cultural competence down their list of high profile priorities. Assertively moving on the path of linking diversity to culturally competent client services will create an organizational culture that will help recruit and retain a more diverse and highly

motivated staff better able to deliver high quality services to the children and families in our care.

References

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