

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents cultural competency as a critical leadership skill necessary for those who organize volunteers. Models of cross-cultural competence are presented, along with specific ideas for how leaders of volunteers can develop cultural competency.*

## Cultural Competency: Not a Lump Sum of Stereotypes

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*"Each organization should be concerned with... the cultural dynamics of the communities they are trying to serve and... look at independent communities and not as one lump sum of stereotypes... so that they make an effort to understand each tribe and each tribe's needs... I think that's a step in the right direction..."*

—Volunteer from *Telling the Whole Story*, a diversity study by  
The Volunteerism Project, 2001)

### VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS, LEADERS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Volunteer programs are often the forerunners of cultural change in organizations.

Why?

Because leaders of these programs must learn to weave the talents of many people with different backgrounds, skills, and experiences into the fabric of the organization. The organization is changed by the people involved, and in turn becomes more inclusive and culturally competent.

Part of your job as a person who organizes volunteers is to recognize this force for change and help your organization become more culturally competent.

### CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultural groups. Cross-cultural competence, like most forms of learning, necessitates a change in attitude, skills, and knowledge. Change

takes time and patience. And it takes practice.

People vary in how they learn. Some people learn by action, or trial and error. Point them in the general direction, and let them go. For these learners, the Cultural Literacy Model is helpful. Literacy is a metaphor for cultural competence: you learn cultural competence much as one learns to read. On one end of the scale, there is illiteracy. Illiteracy is cultural blindness, a belief that people are exactly the same, and the myth of the "melting pot." At the other end of the scale—the end we are working toward—is cultural literacy. Moving from being culturally illiterate to being culturally literate is the difference between reading a primer and reading a great work of literature. To become more culturally literate, a person moves from a beginning stage of awareness, through sensitivity, to competence, and ultimately to credibility. The "end goal" of the literacy model is the stage of credibility, in which one has extensive experience and interaction, and trusting relationships with other cultural groups. Credi-

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## CULTURAL COMPETENCE CONTINUUM

Cultural Destructiveness	Cultural Blindness	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Sensitivity	Multicultural Competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making people fit the same cultural pattern</li> <li>• Excluding those who don't fit</li> <li>• Fostering assimilation</li> <li>• Emphasizing using difference as barriers.</li> </ul> <p>Example = Bureaucratic rules and systems</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not seeing or believing there are cultural differences among people</li> <li>• "Everyone is the same."</li> </ul> <p>Example = Standardized teaching methods</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being aware that we live and function within a culture of our own and that our identity is shaped by it.</li> </ul> <p>Example = Ethnic-specific groups and curriculum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing that there are cultural differences.</li> <li>• Understanding and accepting different cultural values, attitudes and behaviors.</li> </ul> <p>Example = "Menu" plans of employee benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having the capacity to communicate and interact effectively with culturally diverse people, integrating elements of their culture—vocabulary, values, attitudes, rules and norms.</li> <li>• Translating knowledge into action.</li> </ul> <p>Example = Customized services</p>

bility is granted by others and signifies acceptance in the community.

Other people learn by design. These learners need more structure, and sometimes a roadmap. A "mental model" that is helpful for structured learning people who seek to understand cultural competence is the Cultural Competence Continuum (see Figure 1). This model associates cultural competence with skill building. The steps are roughly analogous to the literacy model (awareness, sensitivity, competency, credibility), with the addition of two early steps that precede even awareness. These two steps are cultural destructiveness and cultural blindness.

### CULTURAL COMPETENCE: HOW TO DEVELOP IT

**Practice.** Understanding alone is not enough. Competence takes practice and an alteration of attitude and behavior. Albert Einstein suggested that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. In terms of developing cultural competence, doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result may look like action, but it is certainly not movement toward increased competence. To become more inclusive, we must expand

our attitudes and shift our behaviors. We must do something different.

**Discomfort.** Such change can make us feel stupid or at least uncomfortable. This is to be expected. No one claims that change is easy. But included are some ideas of approaches that may be manageable for you.

**Unevenness.** Complete cultural competence is, of course, our goal. The reality is that most of us are not uniformly competent, but rather our competence varies. We are more competent working with some communities than with others. Competence comes—in part—from life experiences. Some of these experiences are beyond our control, such as where we lived when very young, who our ancestors were, who raised us, how much we traveled, and what our early experiences were with people different from us. How we behave and react as adults, however, is in our control and is our responsibility. Competence is like a muscle—the more we exercise it, the stronger it becomes. Cross-cultural competence in new communities becomes easier the more competence we have developed in other communities. Like learning a new musical instrument, the next instrument is easier than the last. As we become experienced with string instruments and woodwinds, and as we master

the basics of reading music and the art of performance, we become increasingly competent in the world of music. The same goes for the world of cultural competence.

## SELECT ONE NEW BEHAVIOR YOU WILL TRY THIS MONTH

Attitude, Skills, and Knowledge. Competence demands changes in attitudes, skills and knowledge. Try to concentrate on all three types of learning. 1) Embrace the different (attitude), 2) Listen to others (skill), and 3) Learn about other cultures, religions, generations (knowledge).

Some suggestions follow—feel free to add your own.

- Read a book or see a film about someone who is from a culture different than your own.
  - Try renting a videotape such as “What’s Cooking,” “The Joy Luck Club,” “Waiting to Exhale,” “Mi Familia,” “Buena Vista Social Club,” “Witness” or “The Wedding Banquet.”
  - Try reading a book such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Daughter of Persia*, *Colors of the Mountain*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *I’ve Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, or *Race Matters*.
- Start by reflecting on yourself and your own culture. Note any similarities you have observed between your own and other cultures.
- Go to a cultural event, store, or community gathering place that is new to you.
  - Attend a cultural dance performance, concert or holiday festival.
  - Visit an ethnic neighborhood, an ethnic food store, or an ethnic restaurant.
- Spend some part of your day at a bus station, courtroom, park, laundromat, farmer’s market, or other local institution, observing people.
- If you attend a meeting, practice listening carefully by paying close attention to what is being said both verbally and non-verbally. Apply that skill particularly when talking with people who have different views than your own.
- Practice patience. The next time you face a trying situation, concentrate on staying calm and stable. It gets easier.

- Attend a special event in a community new to you.
  - Ideas include Special Olympics, Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year, and Gay Pride Parade.
- Volunteer and help out in a community different from your own.
  - Try visiting a nursing home, tutoring immigrant children, or helping to organize special events for people with seriously illnesses
- Attend a service at a religious institution unfamiliar to you.
  - Go to a mosque, Catholic or Protestant church, synagogue or temple.
- Read a newspaper or magazine from an ethnic press.
  - Go to a newsstand in your community and purchase a local ethnic-specific newspaper or magazine.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE: WHY IT MATTERS

So, why bother? Why take any action to develop your cultural competence? Permit me to offer a few ideas. In terms of your own development, you will need to be culturally competent to develop yourself as a person and a professional, as well as to keep your skills current and honed to do the job. As a person, you will understand more about yourself, have new experiences, and get more out of life. As a professional, you will deal more effectively with your organization’s clients, develop more comprehensive policies and procedures, and be more sensitive to people’s needs. You will need cultural competence to lead your organization in inclusiveness and relevance to the community. You will also need this skill to make your organization a better place for volunteers.

In the broadest of terms, your cultural competence will help you contribute to making the world a better place. And, in the most specific of terms, your cultural competence will allow you to interact with all the people in your community as more than “one lump sum of stereotypes.”