

Cultural Competency Continuum

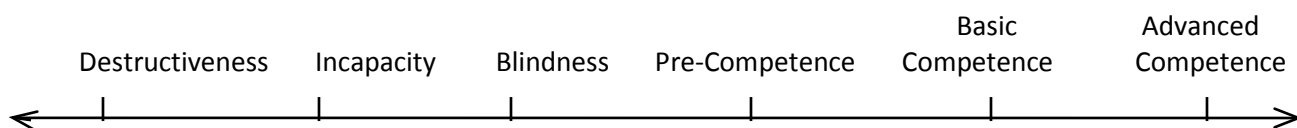
Becoming culturally competent is a developmental process. No matter how proficient an agency may become, there will always be room for growth. It is a process in which the system of care can measure its progress according to the agency's achievement of specific developmental tasks.

Attitudes, policies, and practice are three major arenas where development can and must occur if an agency is to move toward cultural competence. Attitudes change to become less ethnocentric and biased. Policies change to become more flexible and culturally impartial. Practices become more congruent with the culture of the client from initial contact through termination.

As the tasks are defined the system will be guided toward progressively more culturally competent services. First, it is important for an agency to internally assess its level of cultural competence.

To better understand where one is in the process of becoming more culturally competent, it is useful to think of the possible ways of responding to cultural differences. Imagine a continuum which ranges from cultural proficiency to cultural destructiveness. There are a variety of possibilities between these two extremes.

Cultural Competency Continuum



Cultural Destructiveness. The most negative end of the continuum is represented by attitudes, policies and practices which are destructive to cultures and consequently to the individuals within the culture. The most extreme example of this orientation are programs which actively participate in cultural genocide—the purposeful destruction of a culture.

Cultural Incapacity. The system or agencies do not intentionally seek to be culturally destructive but rather lack the capacity to help minority clients or communities. The system remains extremely biased, believes in the superiority of the dominant group and assumes a paternal posture toward “lesser” minority groups. The characteristics of cultural incapacity include: discriminatory hiring practices, subtle messages to minorities that they are not valued or welcome, and generally lower expectations of minority clients.

Cultural Blindness. The system and its agencies provide services with the express philosophy of being unbiased. They function with the belief that color or culture make no difference and that we are all the same. Culturally blind agencies are characterized by the belief that helping approaches traditionally used by the dominant culture are universally applicable; if the system worked as it should, all people—regardless of race or culture—would be served with equal effectiveness.

Cultural Pre-Competence. This term implies movement. The pre-competent agency realizes its weaknesses in serving minorities and attempts to improve some aspect of their services to a specific population. Such agencies try experiments, hire minority staff, explore how to reach minorities in their service area, initiate training for their workers on cultural sensitivity, enter into needs assessments concerning minority communities, and recruit minority individuals for their boards of directors or advisory committees. Pre-competent agencies are characterized by the desire to deliver quality services and a commitment to civil rights.

Basic Cultural Competence. Culturally competent agencies are characterized by acceptance and respect for difference, continuing self-assessment regarding culture, careful attention to the dynamics of difference, continuous expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, and a variety of adaptations to service models in order to better meet the needs of minority populations. The culturally competent agency works to hire unbiased employees, seeks advice and consultation from the minority community and actively decides what it is and is not capable of providing to minority clients.

Advanced Cultural Competence. The culturally proficient agency seeks to add to the knowledge base of culturally competent practice by conducting research, developing new therapeutic approaches based on culture and publishing and disseminating the results of demonstration projects. The culturally proficient agency hires staff who are specialists in culturally competent practice. Such an agency advocates for cultural competence throughout the system and improved relations between cultures throughout society.

Positive movement along the continuum results from an aggregate of factors at various levels of an agency's structure. Every level of the agency (board members, policymakers, administrators, practitioners, consumers and volunteers) can and must participate in the process. As progress is made in implementing the principles at each level, and as attitudes, policies and practices change, the agency becomes more culturally competent.

Adapted from Cross T.L., MSW, *Services to Minority Populations, Cultural Competency Continuum, Focal Point*, Volume 3 Number 1. Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Voluntary Displacement and Empathy Action Education Exercise

A focus of this exercise is building relationships across differences and moving outside of our comfort zones and in thoughtful and respectful ways. The opportunity is to use the community as a place to learn about and gain greater insight in cultural perspectives outside of your own. The expectation is to seek knowledge and understanding that will be useful to use in functioning more effectively in dismantling oppression.

It is also an expectation that the experience will be a lesson to try again and continue to move outside of our comfort zones to deepen our understandings of the dynamics of privilege and oppression.

Action Education is a term we first heard in the work of Gray Delgado when he was at Applied Research Center (ARC). This activity is not based on ARC's work.

Description of Options

Option One – Voluntary Displacement. Participants review listings from local sources of culturally specific activities from a variety of cultural experiences different from their own. Select one in which you will be a cultural minority at the activity. Attend the activity and observe your feelings and reactions to the situation. After the activity complete reflection questions designed to help analyze your experience. If you are doing this with a buddy, then meet with your learning partner and share insights, challenges and questions.

Option Two – Building Empathy. Participants pick an upcoming activity you have scheduled in which there is a person with whom you have some kind of relationship who is culturally different from you and is from a group with whom you would like to develop a stronger relationship and work with more effectively. Review the building empathy framework and attend the activity. Afterwards complete the reflection questions designed to examine the experience of the person who is culturally different from you. If you have a learning partner, meet with them and share insights, challenges and questions.

Guidelines for the Exercise

It is very important to be respectful and thoughtful as you are in the community doing both options. The following are some things to consider:

- Do not do the exercise in a way in which others feel like they are being observed or experimented upon. Others should not be aware you are doing an exercise to increase awareness. If you are going to a cultural event outside of your experience the reason should be based in a desire to learn, appreciate and understand the culture and you can express that if it comes up.

- Review the reflection questions ahead of time. No notes should be taken during the activity. The post activity reflection time is the opportunity to unpack your experience.
- If you are concerned about our choice of activity, ask for feedback from staff or the facilitator. Get help where you don't know or are unsure.
- Move out of your comfort zone. Take thoughtful risks. If you make mistakes, apologize and learn from them.
- Be mindful if you are exploring a situation where you are a "privileged minority" or a "targeted minority." Where you have "privilege" you may carry unaware benefits whether or not you are the majority.

Action Education Exercise Instructions and Planning/Preparation

- Pick a partner and share with them the activity you have selected or what you are considering. Set a planning date by phone or in person once you have completed steps 2 – 4 below and before your activity; and then a face to face date to share your reflections and learnings after your activity. Set those dates based on when your activities are scheduled or likely to be scheduled. If one of yours is before the others and you won't be prepared at the same time you will have to have two planning meetings.
- Review the Purpose and Goals – Options and Guidelines and find reference materials about working across differences, awareness of others and listening to understand. Review the Action Education Exercise Reflection Questions. Make notes or highlight important points.
- Think through your exercise of voluntary displacement or building empathy. Identify and list any ways it will be useful and/or important to prepare for the activity.
- If you have questions – seek assistance.
- Have the planning meeting with your partner. Now that you have thought through your activity and are prepared – do your activity!
- Once you have completed your activity complete the Action Education Reflection Questions.
- Once both you and your partner have completed the activity, have a meeting to share what happened, your insights, learnings, challenges and questions and what worked and didn't work and what you learned. This is not a test – it is a great opportunity for sharing and growing no matter what we were able to do.

Action Education Exercise Reflection Questions

Please write down your response to the following questions:

- Which option did you select, which activity and why?
- Please describe in as much detail as you find useful what you experienced.
- What did you like about your experience?
- What was difficult?
- What did you learn about the group/person you were paying attention to? about cultural differences? about yourself?
- What were you hoping to learn?
- What questions are you coming away with?
- What are your next steps?