

BECOMING A CULTURALLY COMPETENT ORGANIZATION

Lynn Brooks*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is rare that a manager from one county has the opportunity to play an active role in another county's effort to develop a work plan. So needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity offered by Santa Clara County to become a member of an Implementation Design Team whose purpose was to develop a work plan to move the Agency closer to its goal of being a culturally competent organization.

While active as a team member, I immersed myself into the Social Services Agency's (SSA) history to determine how that advanced to this stage in their efforts to provide culturally sensitive services to the diverse population they serve. I found that employee organizations have been actively working within the Agency to promote access and appropriate services. While these efforts provided valuable insights and pointed to the need for specific services, alterations and augmentations, the employee groups recognized that their effectiveness in implementing change was hampered by competition among the groups for limited Agency resources. The Coalition for Effective Services was formed with representatives from all the employee organizations to collectively advocate for cultural competency throughout the Agency.

The Council on Cultural Excellence, a partnership between the Coalition for Effective Services and Agency managers formed to provide leadership to the Agency to implement values, attitudes, policies, practices and structures necessary to serve the culturally diverse communities with respect, dignity, and excellence.

Also in development stages is the Cultural Excellence Committees, that will provide for input from Department level staff including member of the Coalition for Effective Services and other stakeholders (labor organizations, customers, Community Based organizations and community members). Cultural Excellent Committees will be created within the Agency's four departments. It is expected that the Committees will also provide input regarding the strategies identified in portions of the work plan for addressing JTR and Associates' recommendations.

The Council selected JTR and Associates to conduct a cultural competence self-assessment. The assessment was completed by 35% of the staff. The key findings from the survey established a baseline to measure cultural competence. This baseline made it possible to recommend a work plan to move the agency closer to its cultural competency goal.

As a member of the Implementation Design Team, we addressed one priority recommendation chosen by staff and managers to initial implementation of the JTR Report. Our priority recommendation was to "Increase the level of cultural competence among management and supervisory levels to organizationally operationalize culture competence."

Our recommended work plan covered: discussing cultural competency as a regular agenda item at staff meetings; distributing "cultural competency tool kits" among a pilot group of Supervisors for use as resource material during meetings and other

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activities; loading a web-based multi-cultural calendar on all employee computers; and purchasing multi-cultural artwork for display in agency buildings.

Alameda County, through the Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs could pilot a work plan very similar to Santa Clara County's work plan. With the development of employee organizations and a coalition of these organizations, this work plan and others could be initiated within a small budget and short time frame.

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INTRODUCTION

For years, the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) has recognized the value and rewards of serving the area's diverse community by striving to create a multicultural workforce and a culturally competent Service delivery system.

What exactly is cultural competence? It is often defined as "the state of being capable of functioning in the context of cultural difference". The working definition embraced by the Agency is a "set of practice skills, attitudes, policies and structures that come together in a system, agency and among professionals, enabling them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations".

Since 1968, the first employee organization called "El Comite", has been actively working with SSA to promote access and appropriate services for Spanish Speaking Clients. Subsequently, the Agency's African/American, Asian/Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered and advocates for people with disabilities have all formed similar associations.

In 1996, the employee organizations, realizing 1) they were competing for the same limited resources, 2) that there is strength in numbers and 3) with the encouragement of the Agency Director, formed an umbrella organization, the "Coalition for Effective Services" to advocate for cultural competency through out the agency.

In 1997, as the result of a 2-day retreat on cultural competency, the Council on Cultural Excellent was

formed. This council is the partnership between agency managers and the Coalition for Effective Services. This newly formed council had the vision to commission an organization assessment that identified the agency's progress and actions required to accomplish their goal of becoming a culturally competent organization.

In the fall of 1998, JTR and Associates, led by Josie Romero, was selected by a review team of members of the Council Cultural Excellence to conduct a Cultural Competency Self-Assessment. JTR and Associates met with Agency staff from January 1999 through March 1999. Approximately 35% of staff took part in the survey. The final findings and recommendations were presented to the Executive Team, managers and staff in June 1999.

IMPLEMENTATION DESIGN TEAMS

Implementation Design Teams were formed to address two "top priority" recommendations chosen by staff and managers to initiate implementation of the JTR Report and its recommendations. The first meeting of the Cultural Competency Implementation Design Teams was held offsite in December 1999. At this meeting the volunteers discussed the assessment findings, timelines to implementation, the process and outcomes. Two teams were formed. Each team held meetings from December 1999 to March 2000. These two teams of volunteers were cross-department, cross-cultural and labor/management mixed, so they serve as a model for the Agency.

TOP PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION #1

Increase the level of cultural competence among management and supervisory levels to organizationally operationalize cultural competence.

The work plan actions defined by Team I were:

- Discuss Cultural Competence at all agency levels on a regular basis. Cultural Competence should be a regular item on any meeting agenda and incorporated in all presentations. Make special presentations at selected meetings to win support and buy in with all staff. Invite cultural experts to share cultural expertise in service delivery.
- Distribute “Cultural Competency Tool Kits” among a pilot group of Supervisors and Managers for use as resource material during meetings and other activities. The tool kit contains: Reproducible material related to Dealing with Prejudice and Stereotype, Understanding Culture, How culturally aware are you? Communication skills for a diverse environment, Coaching, mentoring and career development, Effective Cross-Cultural Communication, a resource list of Agency “experts” in cultural competency, list of suggested ethnic restaurants staff can try for lunch, and list of web sites that can be used to promote cultural awareness.
- Load a web-based Multi-Cultural Calendar on all employee computers. This includes month-at-a-glance, reflects days with multicultural events, brief description of what events occur on that day, discussion of the events for that day, discussion of the food associated with the day and a recipe for the food associated with the day
- Purchase Multi-Cultural Artwork for display in Agency buildings. The plan is to use the census

2000 posters that reflect many different cultures. These posters would be framed and available for all offices to use to decorate their lobby areas.

TOP PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION #2

Increase opportunities for staff to interact across cultural groups and transfer cultural knowledge to capitalize on staff diversity.

The work plan actions Team II recommended were:

- Create an Agency on-line Cultural Competency Newsletter. Extra Extra—on-line newspaper that would include current articles, chat lines, current affairs relevant to cultural issues and the work environment
- Develop a procedure to allow staff release time to attend cultural events. Teaching/Learning about each other—A memo from the Agency Director inviting staff to participate, including release time to attend cultural events.
- Dedicate time at Unit Meetings to share cultural awareness. Up Close and Personal—Volunteers willing to share their culture, units willing to become familiar with a culture.
- E-Library Listing of Multi-Cultural Resources.
- Use knowledge of culture to positively impact your work. Teachable Moments—Could be brown bag lunches.

SUCCESS TO DATE

In March, the Implementation Design Teams had the opportunity to present and demonstrate their recommended work plans to the Council of Cultural Excellence.

On April 27, the Cultural Competency Comprehensive Work Plan was presented to the Children and Families Committee. Included in the plan were the recommendations of the two Implementation Design Teams. Once the work plan is approved, it is the intent of the Agency to move forward with the recommended work plans from the Implementation Design Teams.

The Implementation Design Teams are by no means the only action being taken by the Agency to address other key findings and recommendations. The JTR report included findings and recommendation for all the departments and there are many parallel efforts continuing to move forward in the Cultural Competency Comprehensive work Plan.

EVALUATING RESULTS

The Agency's *short-term* action plan to facilitate success includes:

1. Receive support from the Children and Families Committee for the Cultural Competency Comprehensive Work Plan endorsing the Agency's continued implementation.
2. Distribute the pilot Cultural Competency "Tool Kit" among Agency's managers and supervisors by December 2000. Actions required include:
 - Setting up a stratified representative sample Agency-wide by June 2000 totaling 26 participants.
 - Establishing a review committee to support and evaluate the pilot's progress by May 2000.
3. Distribute culturally appropriate artwork reflecting diverse cultures for display throughout the Agency's buildings by June 2000.

4. Expand the library of cultural competency resources by October 2000. This library will include materials in alternate formats that are accessible to people with visual and other impairments.
5. Ensure that a memo is distributed to the Agency's managers and all staff stating the Agency's procedure for allowing staff release time to participate in cultural awareness events by July 2000.
6. Identify evaluation questions to measure the success of this work plan in partnership with stakeholders.
7. Assess the program towards cultural competency practices Agency-wide in June 2001.

The Agency's *long-term* action plan includes:

1. Establish additional Cultural Competency Committees and define strategies in additional Agency programs by June 2001.
2. Develop tools and strategies that ensure the continued implementation of the Cultural Competency Comprehensive Work Plan.
3. Design and implement an evaluation finding of the Cultural Competency Comprehensive Work Plan by December 2001.
4. Implement outcome evaluation findings of the Comprehensive Workplan by December 2003.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

For Alameda County, serving a diverse population effectively and valuing a multicultural workforce is

an on-going priority. We have been moving forward with a variety of parallel strategies and programs:

- Diversity training has been promoted for many years and we have specialized training to meet the needs of each department, especially in Children and Family Services. The agency also provides training on Promoting Equality, Civil Rights in the Workplace, Understanding and Valuing Diversity with Respect.
- Along with the Diversity training, the agency developed their own diversity councils to address unique agency needs.
- Employee groups, mostly active within individual departments;
- The Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs, whose purpose is to make the promotion and management of diversity an integral part of the Social Service's mission, cores values and strategic plan.

In addition to current strategies, Alameda County can learn from and easily incorporate a number of the recommendations made by Santa Clara County's Implementation Design Teams:

- The Multi-Cultural Calendar loaded on all employee computers, is an inexpensive tool for a broad exposure to all cultures.
- Adding Cultural Competency awareness in all work functions including unit meetings, division meetings and all training moves us towards functioning effectively in cross-cultural situations.
- Developing an on-line Diversity Newsletter or a Cultural Corner in our current newsletter. Another recommendation would be to add a Cultural Corner to our agency newsletter, "The Buzz". We could feature employees, their history, traditions, what was passed on to them from their families, traditional foods, and recipes,

etc. A quick and easy way to learn about different cultures.

- Putting together a "tool kit" similar to the one identified by Santa Clara County, with information that pertains to our neighborhoods and our staff.
- Displaying cultural artwork in our building's public areas. A suggestion would be to acquire the leftover census posters.

I feel the key to our success will be the Agency's continued effort to develop agency wide employee organizations, representing the diversity of our workforce. The newly formed Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs will play a key role in uniting the many varied voices and building a structure to allow their input. Supporting a forward thinking, valued, challenged affinity group is the connection to employees and the community we serve. The Affinity group's input toward solutions to problems or just brainstorming new ideas can provide the Agency with a valuable resource without having to turn to costly consultants. The group can help connect the Agency to the diverse community we serve for public opinion, political astuteness, leverage, recruitment and support.

To be successful the Agency must provide them with validation and support for the service they can provide. We can gain valuable input into our strategic plans, for example:

- Invite representatives from employee organizations to participate in the Master Plan for Language Access. Who better than an employee with cultural ties to the needs of the community to assist in this plan?
- Invite representatives from employee organizations to participate in the Social Worker, Child Welfare Worker and Eligibility Worker recruit-

ment efforts. As we are looking to add multi-cultures and multi-languages to our workforces, who better to ask than employees with cultural ties to the community and local colleges.

These are just two examples, but our strategic plans would value from the efforts of our employee organizations, if we ask for their expertise. We must challenge them to participate, to value their input and their cultural knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The JTR report provided Santa Clara County with a valid baseline on both cultural competence skills and its current level of organizational performance. Obtaining a baseline on these two dimensions of the organization is a crucial step in developing both a shared vision of cultural competence and the high performing organizations systems that make it possible. The analysis provided them with a road map to achieving this vision. As I have laid out parts of their plan for you today, you see that it is not just a training issue, even though often addressed that way in the past. Cultural competency is a way of thinking that must be reflected in policies and procedures, group meetings, customer service, employee recognition and in all ways that we provide service delivery.

Worth quoting, J. Romero, author of the "Santa Clara County Report on Cultural Competency Self Assessment" reported there are six elements necessary for the development of cultural competence at an individual and organizational level. Cultural competence at the *individual* level requires that staff:

- Be aware of their own cultural values.
- Be aware and accept that there are differences among cultural groups.
- Understand respect the dynamics of difference (a reciprocal process that occurs when individuals of different cultures interact)
- Be open to the development of cultural knowledge in addition to their own.
- Have the ability and skill to adopt practices to the cultural context of clients.
- Ability to engage with different cultures using universal similarities within cultures

At an *organizational* level:

- Organizations must value diversity as a strength
- Be willing to do an organizational self-assessment
- Institutionalize cultural knowledge at all levels of the organization.
- Have skilled management and supervisors who manage the dynamics of differences, which occurs in organizations with a diverse staff.
- Adopt policies and procedures, design programs and services and infrastructure to respond to the culturally diverse staff needs of its community and clients.
- Develop standards of practice, which are congruent with cultural needs of clients.

As we strive for "cultural excellence" in a community that is ever changing, so must we be ever changing.

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