

TOWARDS A CULTURALLY COMPETENT SYSTEM OF SERVICE DELIVERY

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INTRODUCTION

The whole notion of cultural competence, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism, and a host of other such terms has come to dominate discussions and debates in almost every aspect of national policy and in calls for reforms of core American institutions. The whole notion of cultural competence has critical and far-reaching implications for all those American institutions expressly designed to provide assistance and services to adults, children and their families.

The critical and inherent importance of ethnicity and cultural values as a guiding force in reshaping service delivery lends itself to the notion that a system of service delivery must be culturally competent. Cultural competence involves systems, agencies, and professionals with the capacity to respond to the unique needs of populations whose cultures are different than that which might be called "dominant" or "mainstream American". To understand cultural competence you must understand what it means. Cultural competence is defined as follows:

The word culture is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function in a particular way: the capacity to function within the context of culturally-integrated patterns of behavior as defined by the group.

As defined cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system,

Agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Santa Clara County has been investigating the concept of cultural competency and service delivery in a concerted attempt to provide an optimum level of services that addresses the needs of its diverse client population.

COALITION FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICES

The Coalition for Effective Services (CES) was formed in June of 1996, and is composed of representatives from the five employee groups of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency: the African American Employee Committee, the Asian/Pacific Islander Employee Committee, the American Indian Employee Committee, El Comit., and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Concerns Committee. Many counties have employee organizations created to promote awareness and implement policies and practices that result in recruitment, staffing and retention of their respective constituent group. Santa Clara County represents a departure from the traditional model. Their employee groups recognized there was power in numbers. They discovered they had common issues and forged a collaboration that would build a base of support and present a unified voice to Agency administration and the Board of

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Supervisors. The Coalition was motivated by organizational change and the need to hold the agency accountable to the values of its mission statement which states: "The Social Services Agency is a culturally sensitive and socially responsible public agency providing high quality, professional, financial, and protective services for residents of Santa Clara County." The primary focus of the Coalition was to provide the most effective and culturally competent services to their clients and community. It was with this purpose in mind that a Coalition member introduced a cultural competency assessment tool "Building Bridges." Bridges is an adaptation of work completed by La Frontera, Inc. The original document was focused on the needs of a non-profit behavioral health agency providing clinical services to under-served populations in Pima County, Arizona. The assessment instrument was developed using six stages of cultural competence, which range from Stage 1 (seeks to destroy other culture) to Stage 6 (culturally competent, takes advocacy role). These are applied to four broad categories within an organization: (1) organizational environment, (2) public relations/working with the community, (3) human resources, and (4) service issues. Each of the four broad categories is broken into sub-categories with examples of behaviors, situations, or procedures that are representative of each stage of cultural competence. The examples provide a framework for assessing culturally competent behavior in an organization.

The Coalition was inspired by "Bridges" and saw it as a tool that could be utilized in a agency-wide effort to assess various aspects of cultural competency. The coalition considered "Bridges" a vehicle the agency needed to develop and implement appropriate actions to correct areas where improvement was needed. To introduce this concept, the Coalition in December 1997, organized a two day off-site retreat, "Cultural Competency: Beyond Awareness - Into Reality." The idea behind the retreat was to begin a dialogue and agency-wide effort in becoming a more culturally competent agency. The retreat was devoted to building universal advocacy within the agency and determining an appropriate assessment tool to measure cultural competency.

The retreat allowed Coalition members and management to discuss the notion of cultural competency and what that meant in the context of a social service environment. Collectively they defined cultural competency, culture and culturally competent individuals until they could agree on a definition and guiding principles.

Cultural Competency:

The ability to successfully function in the context of cultural diversity.

Guiding Principles for A Culturally Competent Organization:

A culturally competent organization has leadership embracing cultural competency. A culturally competent organization is able to successfully provide services and resources to culturally diverse populations. Such an organization practices through policies, a set of values, attitudes, practice skills and structures that enable it to work effectively to meet client and customer needs in a cross-cultural environment. A cross-culture environment is one in which people of diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation, cultural or socio-economic backgrounds and people with disabilities comprise the client population.

A culturally competent organization includes structures for the continuous evaluation and improvement of its practice with respect to the diverse client populations. Consequently, it seeks the input of its workers, clients and customers for service improvement and program development. It also works in partnership with- other agencies that serve the client and customer populations.

The culturally competent organization supports the education, growth and development of its employees' cultural competency by committing resources and staff time for such a purpose. In such an organization, cultural competence is seen as vital to its success.

THE COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL EXCELLENCE

The retreat was the catalyst the agency needed to begin its journey towards cultural competency. Spirits were lifted and hearts were inspired. To capture the energy and carry the work forward a new group was formed in March 1998; The Cultural Competency Council later changed to The Council for Cultural Excellence (CCE). The CCE consist of the Coalition for Effective Services and Agency management. Their charge, to plan and develop a structure for evaluating the Agency's overall cultural competency. The CCE developed a plan to create cultural competency committees within the Agency's four departments (Department of Family & Children Services, Employment & Benefits, Aging & Adult Services and Administration). The cultural competency committees would assess cultural competency at the departmental level, report findings and recommendations to the CCE, and develop and implement plans for further development of cultural competency. To assess departmental cultural competency it was agreed to utilize "Bridges." However, "Bridges" was developed and adapted to a behavioral health agency environment and not to a social service agency. The CCE was interested in utilizing the "Bridges" instrument and realized that they needed to adapt and modify this assessment tool and make it more relevant to public and private human service agencies.

In June 1998, the CCE decided to request funding (875,000) from the Children and Families Committee of the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors to develop and implement an organizational assessment to further the implementation of Cultural Competency. In order to proceed with their efforts the agency sought to contract with a consultant who could assist them in revising the Bridges assessment tool and/or identify an instrument to effectively reflect the functions of their organization. In addition, the consultant would be required to administer and analyze the results of the organizational assessment and facilitate the assessment process. The agency also wanted to enhance their resource materials to include multimedia, visual and print information addressing cultural competency.

The CCE's proposal was approved and funded by the Board of Supervisors. In July 1998, the Agency advertised a Request for Qualifications to solicit a vendor to assist them in the facilitation and implementation of an organizational assessment. The Agency was committed to working in partnership with staff, employee organizations, the community, and other key stakeholders to ensure that their service delivery system met the diverse needs of their community.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

In the Fall of 1998, JTR and Associates, whose principal consultant is Josie Romero, was selected by a review team of members of the CCE. A subcommittee of the CCE was created to serve as the Project Oversight Committee for the organizational assessment. The organizational assessment consisted of two parts, an Organizational Cultural Competence Self-Assessment and a High Performing Cultural Survey.

The Cultural Competence Self-Assessment enables the Agency to examine existing conditions and ongoing operating procedures in order to improve services to the ethnically and culturally diverse customers. This tool provides the Agency the opportunity to assess its existing strengths and to continuously self-correct through the integration of Cultural Competency principles in all future planning. The self-assessment survey is designed to provide a baseline measure of strengths and gaps in service domains that are essential for development of cultural competent services and supporting organizational infrastructure. The tool is designed to draw out perceptions of staff and management in seven domains: knowledge of community, personal involvement, resources and linkages, staffing/Human Resources, service delivery and practice, community outreach, and organizational policies.

The High Performing Cultural Survey is designed to provide the Agency with a base line on its management practices, organizational system effectiveness and team effort. The survey is based on studies that identify behaviors of a high performing organization. The data from the study is analyzed and used to design Agency specific interventions for improvement.

In late November-early December 1998, the Executive Team and a group of mid-managers and supervisors completed Dr. James Mason's "Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Survey Tool." JTR met with Agency staff in January through March 1999, to guide them in completing the assessment tool. The Agency had an approximate 9.0% participation rate of employees taking the survey.

To date the Project Oversight Committee continues to meet with JTR to discuss formatting of data and report findings. JTR's final findings and recommendations are scheduled to be show cased to the Executive Team, managers and staff on June 22, 1999. A half day off-site retreat has been scheduled with the CCE and Agency managers for July 9, 1999. The retreat is intended to discuss the survey results, recommendations, next steps and the formation of an implementation group.

SUCSESSES AND OBSTACLES

Santa Clara County Social Service Agency has demonstrated a commendable effort and commitment to developing an Agency that is culturally sensitive to the needs of a diverse client population while providing the most effective and efficient services. The Coalition for Effective Services is the driving force moving the organization towards cultural competency. The Coalition and management's continued involvement will be critical to the success of this endeavor.

The Agency has pursued two separate cultural competency assessment tools, "Building Bridges" and the Cultural Competency Organizational Assessment/High Performing Cultural Survey. The Coalition favors "Bridges" and management favors the organizational assessment. Currently, the Project Oversight Committee is attempting to find ways to report findings from the organizational assessment that is compatible with "Bridges." It is not yet clear how the Agency will proceed and begin implementation of these assessment tools. Philosophical differences and processes will need to be discussed and agreed upon to ensure the Agency does not lose sight on the purpose for pursuing cultural competence.

IMPLICATIONS

The San Francisco Department of Human Services for the past five years has been working very closely with its diversity consultant, Jerry Lew & Associates. Through this collaboration the Department has provided diversity training and developed and implemented a number of initiatives and programs intended to begin to change the organizational culture. The Department has made a concerted effort to move away from its past and chip away at the mistrust and the "us versus them" mentality.

Recently the Departments Diversity Training Work Group developed a three-year Diversity Plan that emphasizes culturally competent client services for public contact staff. My internship at Santa Clara County was intended to study how they were addressing a similar concern, and how our Department might acquire insights into their efforts. Santa Clara's approach is more global, they are trying to move beyond training and learn more about their business practices. They want to understand how their organizations function and how those functions and practices can be changed to be more effective. They are attempting to develop a framework for organizational change.

I believe that my department also needs to consider the whole organization and could benefit from some of the examples learned in Santa Clara. A culturally competent organization strives to serve the diverse community with knowledge and respect for a variety of values, family practices and belief systems. I believe there are essential elements that contribute to any institution or agency becoming more culturally competent. San Francisco Department of Human Services can also move towards becoming more culturally competent by: (1) valuing diversity, (2) having the capacity for cultural self-assessment, implement and commit to a cultural competency organizational assessment, (3) be conscious of how cultures interact, (4) have institutionalized cultural knowledge, train and develop staff in cross-cultural interactions, and (5) have a method of service delivery that reflects and understanding of cultural diversity. These elements have to be manifested at every level of the organization and should be reflected in its attitudes, structures, policies and services.