

Creating Healthy Organizational Climates through More Inclusive Approaches

Becoming more culturally proficient includes developing skills and strategies for creating more inclusive approaches that support change at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. Below are examples of inclusive thoughts and actions that address the dominant cultural values of defensiveness, fear of conflict, paternalism/hierarchy, “only one right way,” quantity over quality, either/or thinking and worship of the written word, objectivity, individualism and the sense of urgency.

Dominant Culture Value: Defensiveness

- The organizational structure is set up and much energy is spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it.
- Because of either/or thinking, criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate or rude.
- People respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas.
- A lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that people's feelings are not getting hurt or working around defensive people.
- The defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture.

Alternative Behaviors to Defensiveness

- Understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse.
- Work to understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege).
- Investigate your own fears and become aware of that which makes you feel defensive.
- Name defensiveness as a problem when it is one.
- Remain humble and accept that it is okay to feel uncomfortable.
- Give people credit for being able to handle more than you think.
- Discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission of the effort or of the organization. Work to align the values and culture of the organization with the mission.

Dominant Culture Value: Fear of Conflict

- Many people in power are afraid of conflict and try to ignore it or run away from it.
- When someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person raising the issue rather than to look at the issue that is actually causing the problem.
- An over-emphasis on being polite as a way to avoid having hard conversations.
- Equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude or out of line.
- Believing that those who are part of the dominant culture have a right to comfort with no awareness, understanding or concern for how those in marginalized/target groups may feel uncomfortable in the workplace on a regular basis.

Alternative Behaviors to Fear of Conflict:

- Learn and practice approaches for moving well through disagreements and conflict.
- Make increased understanding of others' points of view high priority when in hard conversations and situations.

- Distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues.
- Allow people to express their feelings and raise hard issues in a variety of ways. Do not use the way someone raises an issue as an excuse to not hear the issue being raised.
- Notice when you feel uncomfortable and reflect on why that is. Expect to feel uncomfortable in the face of difficult and complex issues and remain open to the learning and increased understanding that may come as a result.
- See conflicts as opportunities for deeper understanding, relationship-building and positive organizational change.

Dominant Culture Value: Only One Right Way

- The belief that there is only one “right way” to do things and once people are introduced to the “right way” they will see the light and adopt it.
- When people choose not to adopt the “right way”, they are viewed as having something wrong with them – rather than looking at the thinking of those who believe there is only one “right way.”
- Believing that we have all the answers, know what others need and that our way of doing things is best.
- Taking a missionary approach – believing that only we know what is “good” and not seeing and valuing the culture of other communities.

Alternative Behaviors to Only One Right Way:

- Accept that there are multiple ways to get to the same goal.
- Honor decisions of a group – particularly when it is not what you would have chosen to do – and then see what you and the organization can learn from the process.
- Become curious about how people and groups might do things differently than you, and watch for ways that new approaches might improve the work you are doing.
- Be cautious of people who continually push the same point or approach repeatedly in an attempt to have people do things their way.
- When you or your organization want to work with people and groups different from you, begin from a place of acknowledging how much you have to learn about the community’s ways of doing things.
- Never assume that you or your group knows what is best for another community. Helpful information comes from meaningful and authentic relationships with multiple members of that community.
- Be willing to slow down and honor the complexities of involving multiple perspectives and approaches.

Dominant Culture Value: Paternalism / Hierarchy

- Decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it.
- Those with power believe they are capable of making decisions for others and that they have a right to make decisions for those who do not have power.
- Those with power thinking that it is not important or necessary to understand the viewpoints and experiences of those for whom they are making decisions.
- Those without power understand that they do not have it and they understand who does.
- Although not involved with decision-making, those without power clearly understand the impact of decisions that are made.

Alternative Behaviors to Paternalism/Hierarchy:

- Make decision-making processes as transparent as possible. Ensure that everyone understands who makes decisions in the organization and how they are made.
- Work to create an organizational structure that is more circular and less hierarchical.

- Authentically engage people who are most affected in decision-making processes.
- Make sure all staff members understand the opportunities and responsibilities in setting goals, creating work plans and making decisions.
- Work as a team to co-create goals and work plans.

Dominant Culture Value: Quantity over Quality

- Most of the resources are directed toward producing measurable goals.
- Things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot (for example, numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making and ability to constructively deal with conflict).
- Little or no value placed on process.
- Discomfort with emotions and feelings.
- Lack of understanding of the tension between content and process. For example, high value put on getting through all the agenda items at a meeting (content), with little attention to people's need to be heard and engaged (process). May result in decisions being ineffective, disregarded or undermined.

Alternatives Behaviors to Quantity over Quality:

- Include process or quality goals in planning.
- Create values statements that focus on how we want to do our work together.
- Make sure these values are part of a living document that people use daily in their work.
- Create ways to measure process goals such as partnerships across differences and inclusiveness.
- Take the time in meetings to build relationships and ensure that people are heard and engaged – even if it means tackling fewer agenda items.
- Create a climate where people are valued and appreciated for who they are and for the skills and experiences, they bring to the table.
- Involve people and groups who are most impacted by your programming efforts and engage them authentically in program development.

Dominant Culture Value: Either or Thinking/Fear of Complexity

- Tendency to be locked in binary thinking (things are either/or — good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us) with little ability to hold contradictions and complexities of issues.
- High value placed on “logical thinking” which denies emotions, past experiences, relationships and the complexities of people's whole selves.
- Lack of understanding or desire to understand the intersections of individual's identities (across race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disabilities and other differences) and how this impacts one's daily life, experiences and access to opportunities.
- Closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict.
- No sense that things can be “both/and.”
- Results in over-simplifying complex things. For example, believing that poverty is a result of lack of education or because of one's individual bad choices.
- Creates conflict and increases a sense of urgency as people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives—particularly those which may require more time or resources.
- Often used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between “a” or “b” without acknowledging a need for time and creativity to come up with more options.

Alternatives Behaviors to Either or Thinking/ Fear of Complexity:

- Notice when people use “either/or” language and push to come up with more than two alternatives.
- Notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made.
- Slow processes down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis, individually and collectively.
- When people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively.
- Try to avoid making decisions under extreme pressure.
- Model using “both/and” thinking in your approach to providing options and alternatives.
- Challenge and support individuals to see the impact of differences such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disabilities on the individual lives and realities of people.
- Support individuals in their understanding that we have the capacity to deal with complex issues if we remain open, build trust, recognize and accept the impact of difference and work toward change at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

Dominant Culture Value: Worship of the Written Word

- If it's not written down or in a memo, it doesn't exist.
- The organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information can be shared.
- Those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission.
- Truth and reality is often determined by those with the most privilege, power and access to the written word.
- Those who struggle with, lack experience or choose to communicate differently - through storytelling, art or other creative methods - are judged negatively or seen as uneducated.

Alternative Behaviors to Worship of the Written Word:

- Take the time to investigate the diverse ways people inside and outside of the organization get and share information with the desire to learn and a willingness to be flexible.
- Determine which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening.
- Work to recognize the contributions and skills that every person brings to the organization (for example, the ability to build relationships with diverse groups and those who are important to the organization's mission).
- Make sure anything written can be clearly understood (avoid academic language, acronyms, 'buzz' words, etc.).
- Make sure that anything written is shared widely and open to edits and changes especially by those most marginalized.
- Accept that there are multiple ways to get to the same goal.
- Become curious about how people and groups might do things differently than you, and watch for ways that new approaches might improve the work you are doing.
- When you or your organization want to work with people and groups different from you, begin from a place of acknowledging how much you have to learn about the community's ways of doing things.
- Be willing to slow down and honor the complexities of involving multiple perspectives and approaches.

Dominant Culture Value: Sense of Urgency

- An overwhelming sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, build relationships or to consider consequences.
- Frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community).
- Reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little.
- Often prioritizes efficiency and keeps us from the important work of relationship building, trust building, listening and learning from each other's stories and experiences.

Alternative Behaviors to Sense of Urgency:

- Support the development of realistic workplans, especially for those that include initial or ongoing work with diverse communities where you have done sporadic or no work before.
- Developing leadership that understands that things take longer than anyone expects and that individuals are not penalized for slowing down processes to "meet people where they are at."
- Discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of diversity, equity and inclusion particularly in terms of time and relationship building, in all that we do.
- Continuously ask the question, "Whose not at the table that should be included in this important process/decision before we move forward?"
- Learn from past experience how long things take.
- Write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames, especially when working with diverse communities where trust may need to be built first before extensive planning/programming or measurable and meaningful outcomes may take place.
- Be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency.
- Realize that rushing decisions takes more time in the long run because inevitably people who didn't get a chance to voice their thoughts and feelings will at best resent and at worst undermine the decision because they were left unheard.

Dominant Culture Value: Objectivity

- The belief that there is such a thing as being objective or 'neutral.'
- The belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process.
- The belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort.
- Requiring people to think in a linear (logical) fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways.
- Invalidating or discounting people who show emotion.
- Impatience with any thinking that does not appear 'logical.'

Alternative Behaviors to Objectivity:

- Realize that everybody has a world view and that everybody's world view affects the way they understand things and foremost, realize that this means you too.

- Push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways that are not familiar to you.
- Assume that everybody has a valid point and your job is to understand what that point is.
- Prioritize time for storytelling and deep listening to honor all perspectives and begin building relationships grounded in authenticity and trust.
- Look to yourself first when emotions of mad, sad or scared surface as an alternative to blaming or discounting others feelings or realities.
- Let go of the need to always be right.
- Honor the challenges to or differing perspectives shared about your worldview as gifts given to you as opportunities for deepening trust and relationships across differences.

Dominant Culture Value: Individualism

- Little experience, comfort or support for working as part of a team.
- People in an organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone.
- Accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve.
- Desire for and emphasis placed on individual recognition and credit.
- Can lead to isolation and disconnection.
- Competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate or work in team environments.
- Creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance.
- Diminishes the importance of building skills internally that support partnerships and collaborations that can be replicated and strengthened in our work in diverse communities.
- Maintains an “expert” model that can cause barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Alternative Behaviors to Individualism:

- Include teamwork as an important value in your organizational values or vision statement.
- Make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance and connected outreach.
- Evaluate people’s ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done.
- Make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person.
- Make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals; create a culture where people bring problems to the group.
- Use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities.
- Provide resources and professional development opportunities to support building and sustaining high performing teams that navigate conflict well, use the diversity of the team as an asset not an inconvenience, model trust building and shared power.
- Be intentional about celebrating and highlighting effective and innovative team approaches and skills.