What does it mean to be culturally responsive? Why is it important?

A culturally responsive organization is one that is relevant to participants of diverse cultural backgrounds and respectful of their beliefs, practices and values. The capacity to respond to the needs of diverse communities requires cultural knowledge, skills and values at all levels, from individual staff, to programs, organizations and systems (State Government of Victoria, 2009). Cultural responsiveness is becoming more important for community organizations. As communities across the country are increasingly diverse, more organizations find that the cultural background of their leaders and staff are very different from participants in their programs. Considering these demographic changes, cultural responsiveness is crucial for ensuring that programs are effective and accessible to community members. More recently, the hiring of cultural insiders to staff organizational positions is introducing a new level of cultural competency.

Levels of Cultural Responsiveness

There are different levels of cultural responsiveness, and organizations continuously strive to reach higher levels. The three common levels of cultural responsiveness are translation, culturally adapted programs, and culturally specific organizations (Cheng, 1996; Cheng & Balter, 1997; Bernard, 1998).

Translation
Translation is the lowest level of cultural responsiveness. It simply entails translating the materials and the delivery of programs into the language of participants. Yet, translation is not enough to ensure the effectiveness of programs.

Culturally Adapted Programs
Many organizations move beyond translation and adapt their programs to the culture of participants. This entails adaptations such as modifying activities to fit the communication norms of participants or using examples that more closely reflect the lifestyles of participants. Culturally adapted programs have culturally competent staff. Yet, these changes are limited to program implementation. The philosophy behind the program and the values of the organization still reflect the dominant organizational culture only. While culturally adapted programs are a vast improvement from mere translation, they are still not truly culturally responsive to the values and norms of specific communities they serve because they fundamentally expect communities to adapt to the organization’s values and not vice versa.

Culturally Specific Organizations
Community organizations should aim to become culturally specific organizations. This entails changing not only program implementation, but also transforming program philosophy and organizational practices and beliefs to integrate the worldview of community members as well as bicultural staff members. For example, many parent education programs are child-centered and focus on the individual child’s development. Latino immigrant parents may find this notion of child development strange, or even offensive. To become culturally specific, a program would incorporate the values of family and community into its philosophy of parenting and programming.

A Case Study
Becoming Culturally Responsive
The Latino Family Childcare Project (LFCP) is a family childcare provider certification program delivered in Spanish. The project was developed by an organization in Madison, WI in response to concerns about the accessibility and quality of childcare services for the growing Latino immigrant population (for the more detailed case study, see Uttal, 2009). The program coordinator had an existing certification program in English, which was adapted by translating materials into Spanish and hiring a bilingual program coordinator. The program coordinator removed barriers to participation by holding workshops on weekends and providing transportation and childcare during workshops. She offered incentives such as providing meals and raffles for childcare program materials.

After the program was launched, the program coordinator found that the values and circumstances of the participants were different from participants of the existing English program, and that she would have to make adaptations to the program to respond to these needs. Here are some examples:

- Government regulation of family childcare was unfamiliar to many participants. The program needed to add more up-front explanations of why childcare is regulated.
- Participants needed additional assistance to deal the paperwork involved in certification, which is complicated. Therefore, the program coordinator needed to spend more time with each participant in the Spanish program in comparison to those in the English program.
- The program coordinator investigated immigration policies and had to assess the potential risks of receiving background checks of participants and their family members if they were undocumented.
- Racism experienced by Latino immigrants made completion of the certification process more difficult for them. In some cases, their landlords were reluctant to provide consent for renters to have family childcare set up in their homes.
- Many participants faced an array of pressing issues such as finding employment, healthcare, citizenship status, discrimination, learning English and more. The certification program also became a site of community education around these issues that pertain to the wellbeing of children and families even though these issues are not typically addressed in conventional certification programs.
- Participants hoped that the program could serve the community as a whole rather than clients as individuals. They felt that many of the problems they faced were shared problems that required change through community support. In order to bring regulated childcare to Latino families that are unfamiliar with this concept, they believed the larger Latino community needed to
understand its value. They also saw the purpose of family childcare as benefiting the whole community, not just individual providers, parents and children. This requires a change from a client-centered philosophy to one that is community-based.

The program coordinator worked hard to adapt the program and advocated for deeper organizational changes. The organization was responsive to the needs of Latinos by hiring a bilingual program coordinator and supporting some of the programmatic changes she proposed, such as addressing a broader range of issues during workshops. However, the organization was not as receptive to making changes on the organizational level. For example, the organization limited participation to those directly seeking certification rather than opening the program to other community members, which reflected the dominant client-centered worldview rather than the community-based worldview that participants held.

How culturally adapted are the programs of your organization?

The following list is important questions to consider when reflecting on how your organization’s programs can be more culturally specific to the community served. The most important questions to consider are: **How do participants perceive their own needs and expectations for the program? What changes need to be made to meet these needs?** You can consider this question in relation to the following specific areas:

- **Are program staff culturally competent?**
  The LFCP ensured that the project had culturally competent staff by hiring a bilingual program coordinator who was part of the Latino community. If your organization is unable to hire bilingual or bicultural staff, make sure that staff members receive training and become familiar with the culture of participants.

- **Are there barriers preventing community members from participating?**
  The LFCP removed barriers by holding workshops on weekends and providing childcare. They also encouraged participation by organizing workshops around meals and holding raffles. Consider the work schedule and other constraints participants may experience.

- **Do participants need assistance in other aspects of their lives to make the program more effective for them?**
  In the case of LFCP, the program coordinator addressed issues of concern to participants, such as employment, healthcare, discrimination and more, even though these issues were not a part of the original curriculum. What are the life situations of the participants of your programs? How do other areas of their lives affect the area that is the focus of your programs?

- **How might racism in the community affect participants’ experience of the program?**
  Racism in the community may affect specific communities and programs in different ways.

- **How might immigration status affect community members’ participation?**
  If your programs serve immigrant communities, consider how their immigration status might affect their participation, particularly for participants who may be undocumented. Participants may need information and assistance regarding immigration policy and processes. In the case of LFCP, participants were concerned about the potential risks of background checks, which are required for certification, on undocumented family members.

How culturally specific is your organization?

If your organization has already researched many of the questions presented above and made the necessary programmatic changes, then you are doing well on the level of culturally adapted programs. Creating culturally adapted programs is only the first step to transforming an organization into one that is culturally specific. The most important question to consider for creating a culturally specific organization is: **How can we transform the philosophy and values of the organization to incorporate the new ideas brought by the community and our bicultural program staff?** The following specific questions will guide you in reflecting on how culturally specific your organization is, and what to consider for making more progress towards cultural responsiveness.

- **What practices do agencies have in place to learn about the worldview and expectations of**
The bilingual program coordinator was an important asset to the LFCP as she reflected the needs and expectations of participants to the leaders of the organization. In addition to valuing the input of bicultural staff, other methods include participatory research, ongoing reflection, and regular interviews or surveys to solicit feedback from participants.

- **Are bicultural program staff members given the authority to make program adjustments?**
  Bicultural program staff members are instrumental in the process of becoming a culturally specific organization and can act as a bridge between the community served and organizational leadership who often come from different cultural backgrounds. However, organizations are often structured in a way that does not allow program staff sufficient autonomy and does not involve them in organizational decision-making, as in the case of the LFCP.

- **How do participants identify themselves in relation to the social context? How can the program take this into consideration?**
  For the Latino immigrant community served by the LFCP, a strong sense of community is highly valued. Potential childcare providers see themselves not as entrepreneurs, but as members who want to contribute to their community. Many agencies see the individual development of participants as their goal. How can these goals be changed to see the importance and success of their program in terms of the larger community?

Cultural competency and organizational responsiveness cannot be achieved overnight. Rather, it is a long-term process through which organizations strive to become more and more effective at meeting the needs of the community. Because becoming a culturally specific organization requires deep transformation, it may seem like an overwhelming task. Even so, given the increasing diversity of most communities all over the country, it is crucial for all organizations to begin the process and progress towards cultural responsiveness one step at a time. Using the questions provided in this digest to diagnose the current responsiveness of your organization is a good starting point for setting small and manageable goals, implementing changes, and ongoing evaluation and improvement.

### Further Resources for Improving Cultural Responsiveness

- The National Center for Cultural Competence has a wealth of resources for cultural responsiveness in the field of health and mental health, including assessment instruments, planning tools, effective practices, useful links and more. [http://nccc.georgetown.edu/](http://nccc.georgetown.edu/)

- Attachment Across Cultures provides information about parent-child attachment beliefs and practices of different cultures. Their website is a valuable resource to programs for new mothers. [http://www.attachmentacrosscultures.org/](http://www.attachmentacrosscultures.org/)

- Culturally-Based Capacity Building, a report published by the National Community Development Institute, describes culturally responsive approaches for building capacity among communities of color. [http://www.ncdinet.org/media/docs/1511_CBCBArticle.pdf](http://www.ncdinet.org/media/docs/1511_CBCBArticle.pdf)
Works Cited


