

Some Thought About Working with Cultures Other Than Your Own Self-Management Resource Center 2022

All too often when planning to offer programs, diversity is not considered or is considered later after many other parts of the program are already in place. Program planning cannot be done well until you know who you want to serve and have those folks be part of the planning. The disability community says, “***nothing about us without us.***” This should be true in all program planning. Those that you want to serve should be part of the planning and be represented as part of your staff.

Honoring diversity starts with deciding who you want to serve and making a long-term commitment to them. Is it a specific racial gender, age, religious or ethnic group? Is it a disease specific population? Is it a specific language group? Is it people with disabilities? Once you know, you can start learning about these groups or communities. This is necessary, even if you are a member of that group. One of the most important things to remember is that there is as much diversity within a group as there is across groups. For example, a physician from Bolivia may or may not have much in common with a Mexican farmworker in California. A Serbian living in Canada may or may not be the person to work with Bosnian refugees. A medical student from China may or may not be the best person to work with an Asian immigrant community. Just because people share some common characteristics (race, ethnicity, language, etc.) with a community does not always mean they can work well in or with that community. Do not make assumptions, but always ask the people who know, the people you want to serve. Remember we are members of many groups and may or may not feel comfortable or confident when working in all these groups. Just take a moment and think about yourself. Of what groups are you a part and with which do you feel most competent and comfortable? Some questions you may use when you talk to those in the community who know the people you want to serve:

1. If you were to offer a program for xxx in your community what would you want it to do?

Then describe the program, how it meets the needs just mentioned and how it has served others like the community you want to serve. Offer to let leaders from the community talk with other communities. Do not go in with a set “pitch.” Tailor your pitch around what the community wants. If there is not a fit, say so. For example, our program does not offer advice on housing, but it does have a sections

teaching problem solving and decision making where participants can discuss this if they wish.

2. If you wanted to offer this program in your community, what would you do? Listen, if all goes well you will learn exactly what you have to do to offer programs. If there is something you do not understand or cannot do, say so.

3. What do you think the challenges will be? Again, listen and problem solve.

Follow up with an email outlining any agreements and what each will do next and a time to meet again. Be sure to say, this is what I think we agreed upon, please let me know if I did not get it right.

BTW these three questions work well in underserved communities and also in talking to potential funders such as insurance companies, two different cultures.

Commitment and learning: Working to honor diversity means making a commitment and being willing to learn. The commitment is for years, not months, weeks or just offering one workshop. It means establishing relationships and making friends with members of the community, asking them what you should know as well as reading about the community. It means showing up on Saturday when invited to an acorn festival or other special event or celebration. For some groups it may mean scheduling workshops for evenings or for Sunday afternoons. In short, it means devoting time and energy to learning and being willing to step outside your comfort zone. If these are not things you are willing and able to do, then find someone in your organization who is more comfortable with leading your diversity efforts. Even if you are comfortable and have the commitment, you still want to always work with partners from the community.

Finding the right partners is one of the keys to working successfully with diversity. Start by asking everyone you know and can find in the community of interest. For example, who are leaders in the elder community and who do older people trust? **Do not stop here.** Next talk to all these people and ask the same questions. You should have many names. Once you have a list of names, look for those that appear the most frequently. These are the people who may make great partners and leaders. You might ask these folks to be an advisory committee. Or you might hire one of these people to help with or lead your diversity efforts or ask them to be leaders or to help find leaders.

These people's names you gather may not always be who you expect, such as the usual community, church, or tribal leaders. The community, church, or tribal leaders are important because they are often the gatekeepers. They are the ones that decide if they will support your efforts. However, they are seldom the people to do the work or sit on advisory committees because as leaders, they are often too busy. Still, you want to keep these gatekeepers informed. Always let them know what you are doing, and always ask what you can do for them. (If what they ask is not possible, say so. If you make a commitment, be sure to keep it.) The two things you want from these gatekeepers are 1) they name or appoint people to help you, and 2) support introducing you to the community. Always remember that their asking others to work with you is a gift.

Others want to know if they can trust you: We all want to know if we can trust each other. This is even more important when you are working in a group other than our own. It may be that others who have gone before you have done something to undermine trust. This is not your fault, but it is important for you to know and understand; it is also something with which you will need to deal when you work in and with that group or community. Start building trust by learning about the challenges facing the community. Listen before offering solutions. In many cultures, showing up on time, dressing appropriately, and doing what you say you are going to do, are all ways to gain trust. The problem is that “on time” and “dressing appropriately” may mean different things to different people. Even “arriving on time” may have a different meaning. If you are invited to something, go, if you are offered food, eat it, if you encounter silence take a moment to think about it, and accept it. Let others in the group break the silence. These actions help build trust. Trust building is many actions over time, and trust leads to mutual respect. Two key recommendations for ‘trust building’:

- 1. Listen, listen, and listen some more:** As we learn about diversity and work to become more competent in and with diverse groups we need to listen. This is especially true when facilitating workshops in diverse communities. For example, if someone comments during an activity that health professionals disrespect them, do not ignore the comment. Rather, allow them to explain, then acknowledge their feelings, show empathy, and offer to talk more with them at the break or after the session. You may not be able to solve their problem but letting them know you heard and empathize with them can go a long way. You may also be able to offer them other resources where they can find assistance. If you have a leader who says they can never teach on Saturday, do not assume that they are guarding their free time. Instead ask why so you know and can respect their wishes. It may be

that this is their holy day. As we listen, we often make assumptions based on our own experiences. In other instances, we are afraid to show our ignorance or afraid to that if we ask it will lead to something more complication or other problems. Avoiding potentially uncomfortable discussions says a lot about you and your programs. It can cause difficulties and misunderstandings, especially when working with a group other than your own. The best thing to do if you do not understand, or even if you think you understand, is to ask. This is what it means to be culturally humble. Going back to our workshop example then, a leader might ask, “Could you tell me more about being disrespected?.” This is how we learn. Remember, we do not have to fix the problem or apologize unless we did something wrong, but we do need to acknowledge that this is their reality and take time to listen.

- 2. Avoid Stereotypes:** While there is some truth in some stereotypes there are also many exceptions and misconceptions. Please note that in this write up we say nothing about one group of people being like this and another group of people being like that. Remember just because people share some common characteristics (race, age, ethnicity, language, etc.) this does not mean they are all the same. Where leaders often get into trouble is when they use stereotypes and act or say something like: “That is OK, we know that _____ are always late.” Or “_____ are so emotional.” A rule of thumb to help avoid stereotyping is to never assign any attribute to a whole group.

How do I know if things are going wrong? Some clues that help us know if things are not on track or going well are the following. People who use to call you back or keep in touch do not follow-up or respond to you. People do not show up at meetings. In a group meeting or workshop, everyone is silent. Participants do not show up to the second session. Everyone looks boarded. You just have a “feeling” or sense something is not right. One of the mistakes that people often make when these things happen is to make excuses for them and say that these folks are busy, or just not motivated. These are assumptions; therefore, when these things happen, it is more useful to look at yourself and your leaders and ask what might have happened and if there is anything you can do to correct this. If you do not know what happened, ask. Be humble and avoid being defensive. This is where partners can be helpful.

What to do if things go wrong: Stop what you are doing and find out what is happening. Reach out and ask your partners or the participants who did not show up again why they did not return. What happened? Could we have done things

differently? Then listen. At first there may be silence but eventually you will begin to learn what is happening. A leader was not respectful, a cultural norm was unintentionally broken, a participant said something inappropriate to another participant, maybe someone talked when they should have been listening. Also ask what you can do to fix whatever the problem might be and listen to all their ideas. Don't go for the first idea or the easy fix. Listen, ask open ended questions.

You made a mistake. Now what? This discussion assumes that the intent was good, or the mistake was unintentional. As soon as you are aware that you made a mistake or someone points out a mistake, the best thing to do is to admit the mistake, say you were wrong. "What I just said was racist, I am so sorry." Do not give excuses. Do not try to fix it. It may be that someone will make an excuse for you. You can thank them and say that you just were not thinking but nevertheless what you said was harmful to others and still racist. If this happens one time, you will be able to resume your plans, and you may have gained some respect by being honest, taking responsibility for your mistake, and apologizing for it.

Why SMRC Programs tend to work across cultures

There are several things about our programs that make them appropriate across cultures.

1. They are self-tailored: We never make suggestions to participants about what they should or should not do, this is up to each participant, and we support them in whatever they chose. This is true for action planning, problem solving and decision making as well as brainstorming and call outs.
2. Directions in the manual say throughout "say in your own words". In this way leaders can tailor to the context substituting frequently eaten foods for foods in the manual or including local ways people can get exercise among other things.
3. Our materials include drawings of people from many cultures and sizes. When names are used in examples they are also drawn from many cultures. Most people can find something to which they can relate in the book.
4. Most important of all we push as much as we can having leaders from the same culture as the people they are teaching. This is probably the most difficult, as program coordinators are often most comfortable having

leaders like themselves or are not skilled in recruiting leaders across cultures.

An organization or participants wants to know how they can adapt a SMRC or another program. First, find out what they want to adapt. Almost always it is using more culturally appropriate examples during the workshop activities. This is allowed. That is why the manual says “use your own words” over and over again. Sometimes they want to add content, prayer, or other culturally appropriate events. This is also acceptable if 1) it is appropriate for everyone attending, and 2) this occurs before or after a regular session, not during the session. Sometimes they say that they have lots of changes they want to make. In this case, ask them to write those changes down, send them to you and you can send them on to SMRC. We take these suggestions very seriously, and often make changes. Our programs are better because of these inputs.