



Cultural Competence

An Important Skill Set for the 21st Century

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Displaying the cultural competency behaviors of active listening, empathy, and effective engagement can help us to create a welcoming environment and establish the appreciation of similarities and differences among cultures.

Cultural competence is the ability of a person to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people of various cultural backgrounds. Cultural background can include the beliefs, customs, and behaviors of people from various groups. Gaining cultural competence is a lifelong process of increasing self-awareness, developing social skills and behaviors around diversity, and gaining the ability to advocate for others. It goes beyond tolerance, which implies that one is simply willing to overlook differences. Instead, it includes recognizing and respecting diversity through our words and actions in all contexts.

Why Is Cultural Competence Important?

Demographic shifts and an increasingly diverse population

The United States has always had an ethnically diverse population, including African Americans, Native Americans, and Japanese Americans, to name a few. In recent years, our country has undergone dramatic shifts in its population, particularly as rapid migration has changed its landscape. For example, the Hispanic population in the U.S. rose from approximately 12.5 percent in 1990 to over 16 percent by 2009, and is anticipated to comprise 25 percent of the population by 2050. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2043, the U.S. will become a “majority

minority” country. This means that although the non-Hispanic white population will still be the biggest group, a single group will no longer make up the majority. More than 50 percent of the population will identify as belonging to an ethnic minority group or any group other than non-Hispanic white.

In other words, although we have always lived in an ethnically diverse society, we are all operating in an increasingly culturally diverse environment where we need to be able to interact, communicate, build relationships, and work effectively with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, those of us working with youth need to prepare them to operate in a society that will be even more diverse in terms of religion, ethnic background, and sexual orientation.

Societies are increasingly becoming globalized

Today’s world is diverse and global. Technology has made interactions across cultures around the world a very common experience. Social networking sites, blogs, and chat rooms are letting people regularly interact across national borders. Many industries currently have a significant amount of international collaboration, and careers in many fields increasingly entail working with people from different countries, both directly and indirectly. Children and youth today need to be prepared to enter a workforce and adult society that spans across borders and involves interacting with people of diverse backgrounds in myriad settings.

Recognizing our increasingly globalized society, many industries and professional organizations (e.g., National Education Association, RAND Corporation) are emphasizing the importance of cultural competence and related skills (e.g., global awareness) as essential in today's workplace. Numerous universities are also incorporating cultural awareness and development as part of the higher education experience and career preparation by creating opportunities for students to participate in international experiences. Successfully navigating our globalized society entails being able to understand and appreciate diversity in its many forms, and to effectively engage and communicate with people from different cultures.

Persistence of issues around cross-cultural contact, discrimination, and related challenges

Despite the fact that societies are becoming more culturally diverse and globalized, issues surrounding inequality, bias, and breakdowns in intercultural communications persist. The FBI reports that in 2013, there were almost 6,000 reported incidences of hate crimes in the United States. Of these, almost 60 percent had racial or ethnic motivations; 20 percent were around sexual orientation; and 17 percent involved religion. There are also numerous bias incidents, persistent inequalities around racial and ethnic lines, and institutional policies that perpetuate inequalities at both the individual and institutional levels. One need not look beyond recent news reports to find that ethnic tensions persist.

Discrimination and bias in various forms are hurtful all around

Discrimination and bias have serious consequences. For example, stereotypes and bias have been claimed as the foundation for the surge in reported incidences of police brutality and the deaths of African Americans. A substantial body of work has also shown that victims of bias suffer in ways that may be less visible—in their academics, work performance, and other domains of life—even when those biases are subtle. Research on “microaggressions” (i.e., regular or daily subtle and minor acts of bias that may be consciously or unconsciously expressed) illustrate this point and show that even subtle incidences can have cumulative and serious consequences for socio-emotional well-being.

Negative effects are evident not just for the victims of biases. Recent research suggests that stereotyping, bias, and incidences of microaggressions not only affect the victim but also contribute to a hostile environment for everyone

so that people in the broader setting (e.g., workplace) might feel invalidated or even intimidated and abused.

In addition, holding biases and prejudice also negatively affects the very persons holding those stereotyped beliefs. Experimental research shows that individuals with racial biases who interact with people of color show increased levels of cortisol and other stress hormones. Thus, biases and stereotypes have negative effects all around—for individuals and institutions, as well as for the targets of bias and for those holding such biases.

Tips for Building Skills in Cultural Competence

Developing cultural competence is a process rather than an end point. Just like any skill, the process of development and improvement continues, and it is hard to point to a particular time when one can say “That’s it! I’ve reached it!” There are many ways by which we can increase our capacity to be effective in our interactions with others. Below are some suggestions to move forward in your development.

Increasing cultural and global knowledge

Learning more about other cultures and being aware of current events is often key in learning about various cultural groups’ points of view. When working with people from different cultural backgrounds, it can be useful to learn about their culture’s practices, values, and beliefs. For example, learning about the languages spoken in their communities, child-rearing practices, or religious traditions can help us understand and interact with individuals and groups of various backgrounds.

Conflicts that emerge between groups are often rooted in issues that may have deep historical origins. It is very helpful to understand these historical backgrounds that may help explain current events. For example, why do certain words or phrases that seem neutral evoke negative reactions with specific populations (e.g., “Where are you from?” or “You really should be appreciative of what I give you”)? Some of these phrases reflect long histories and current experiences of oppression and thus evoke hurt and other negative feelings. Hurt feelings among youth may impact their ability to develop trusting and strong relationships with adults, which are necessary for youths’ growth and development. Similarly, some traditional events may evoke controversy as to their meaning and whether they should be celebrated at all (e.g., Columbus Day). Regardless of what side of the debate you might align with, the first and most important step is to understand the issue.

Finally, beyond history, numerous events and policies

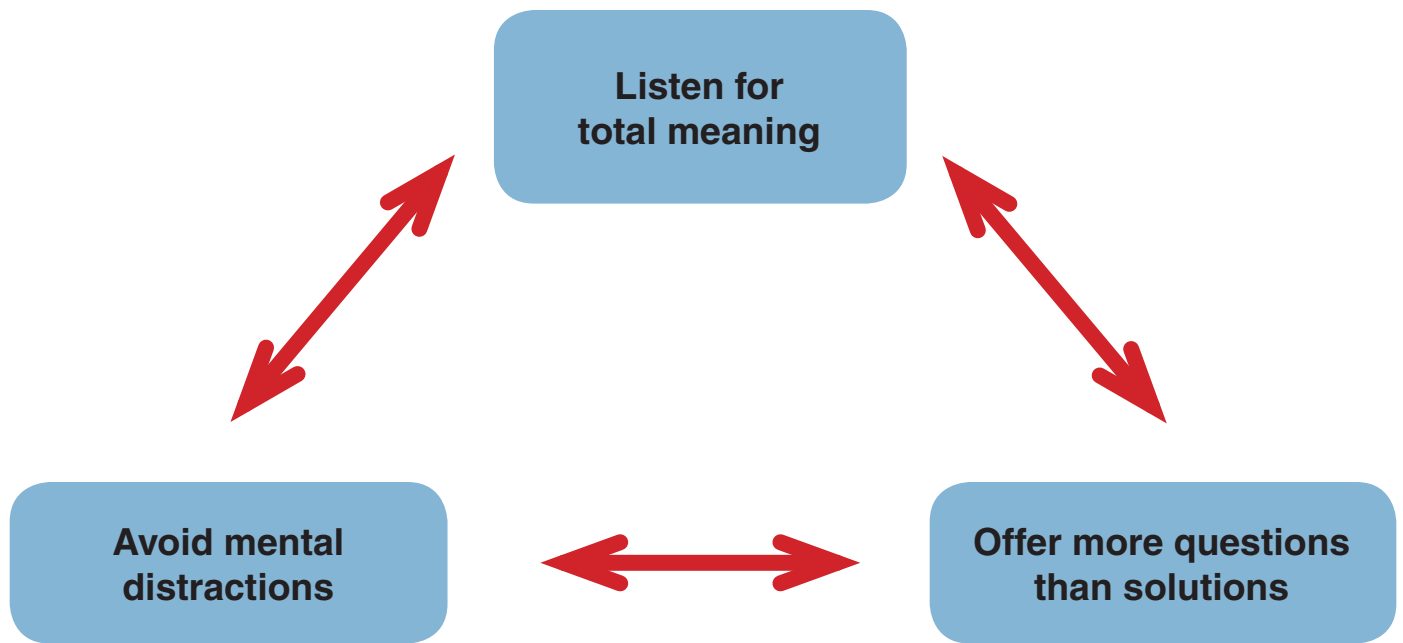


Fig. 1. The Art of Active Listening

continue to impact the individuals, families, and cultural groups with which you are interacting. Examples of these include wars and territorial conflicts. For those of us working with refugees or migrants in our communities, it is essential we understand events that underlie their movement from their home countries.

Self-assessment

Reflecting critically on our own biases and prejudices helps to develop the skills necessary to effectively interact and engage with individuals whose cultural background is different than our own. Realizing that everyone has biases is an important step for building cultural competence. Our biases may stem from our backgrounds, experiences, or personal demographics, and these biases exist whether or not we are aware of them.

The problem is when we deny or fail to acknowledge our biases. Our interactions and perceptions of others may be influenced by our biases. These biases may cause us to inadvertently act in ways that are discriminatory towards others.

However, if we are aware of our biases, we can work to diminish our own prejudices and the implications they may have in our interactions with others. In fact, holding on to the belief that one is “color-blind” and unbiased is linked to unfavorable behaviors, such as miscommunication and lack of trust across racial groups, reluctance to help others from a different cultural group, and less ability

to detect biased behaviors. Acknowledging that we all have biases and that we all hold stereotypes is the first step in cultural competence.

Going beyond tolerance: Building skills and putting them in action

Tolerating different cultural backgrounds is a step in the right direction. However, tolerance is not always optimal. In fact, tolerance usually means that you are simply putting up with something that is undesirable. Cultural competence goes beyond “putting up with” differences and instead involves being appreciative, affirming, and inclusive of all cultural backgrounds. For example, to increase our cultural competence, we can ask members of a cultural group open-minded, open-ended questions, or ask for more information, such as, “I would like to learn more about . . .” Additionally, making an effort to detect verbal and nonverbal actions that certain cultures may not find appropriate (e.g., hand shaking) can establish an inclusive environment.

Overall, cultural competence has three important components: active listening, demonstrating empathy, and effective engagement. Each is detailed in the next section.

Active Listening

When was the last time you engaged in an active listening conversation with someone who has vastly different

experiences and beliefs than you? Actively listening to an individual allows you to learn about that person's culture and experiences. You should listen for total meaning by focusing on the content that is being given and concentrating on what is being said.

Active listening entails thinking about the feeling behind the content or the emotion involved. The emotion gives evidence of the real intent of the conversation, which will help you identify if the person is upset, inquisitive, or acting on another emotion and allow you to respond appropriately.

In addition to listening for total meaning, you should also avoid mental distractions when building cultural competency through active listening. This means listening with focus and not becoming involved in mental chitchat about how you are going to respond to a person or question. For example, if you believe that homosexuality is immoral and a choice and you are in a debate with a friend on the legalization of same sex marriage, instead of engaging in mental chitchat about what scientific or biblical facts you can recite to prove your perspective, the key is focusing on what is being said and how it is being said.

Lastly, once you have listened for true meaning, the other person feels understood, and you both have limited mental distractions, you will want to make sure you ask more questions of the other person than offer solutions. Do not jump directly to giving people advice or offering solutions about what you perceive to be the problem or their problem. The response that is effective, especially if you are in a situation in which you are responsible for resolving a conflict between two people, requires seeking more information and multiple perspectives first.

Empathy

The second component of cultural competency is demonstrating empathy. It is the art of seeing and feeling the situation of another, walking in another person's shoes, or seeing the world as that person sees it. Empathy involves understanding that person's perceptions and the conclusions that person draws about his or her life experiences. It does not mean you have to agree with that person's perceptions and conclusions, but at the very least, you are able to see the other person's position.

Take the previous example related to sexual orientation. A privilege of being heterosexual in our society is having multiple media, print images, and entertainment that portray heterosexual love and relationships and indicate it

is not taboo to hug or give a peck to your girlfriend or husband while in public. These images are not as prevalent for same-sex couples. Therefore, empathy involves being able to understand the other person's position. To be effective, you must engage in appropriate inquiry and dialog. It also involves building relationships with an individual or particular cultural group.

Engagement

The third component of cultural competency is effective engagement. Engagement should be mutually beneficial and a reciprocal learning experience in which you learn from one another. Focus on the behaviors and the situation, not the person. Value-laden statements making the individual the target should be avoided.

If the focus of the conversation or interaction is about a tradition or belief, keep the feedback within the context of that tradition or belief. Do not say, *You are being silly because you believe that Muslims should be able to step out of class to pray six times a day.* Focus on understanding the tradition or practice. Approach the topic by saying: *I understand this is part of your religion, but I do not understand how it effects your belief in God and why you are required to pray six times a day.* This opens up dialog in which the person can explain to you the tenants of that culture and the requirement of prayers.

Displaying the cultural competence behaviors of active listening, demonstrating empathy, and effective engagement is important when moving beyond tolerance. These three components will help us to create a welcoming environment and establish the appreciation of similarities and differences among cultures.

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