

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.

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 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: 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 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 it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis.
- 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.