

A graphic of a rolled-up scroll with a dark orange background and a lighter orange border. The text is centered on the scroll.

Section 6:
Culturally
Competent
Boards

Culturally Competent Boards

Public policy and governance boards often make decisions that will have an impact on individuals from many different backgrounds. Over representation of minorities in public service systems indicate diversity in service population and a need to ensure your board is culturally competent with broad diversity.

This chapter will define diversity and cultural competence and why they are important for your board. It will outline strategies for recruiting diverse families, youth, and other board members. Once you have a diverse board, maintaining and sustaining the diversity takes commitment.

The chapter includes:

- Steps in building a culturally competent board;
- Common barriers;
- Strategies;
- Cultural competence continuum;
- Roles in ensuring a culturally competent board; and
- Resources for more information.

Building Cultural Competence on a Board

A first step in prioritizing cultural competence is recognizing, as a board, that having the respect and trust of the communities' affected by your board's decisions is critical to creating culturally competent policies. The approach of incorporating a community member into the board's decision-making structure allows the board to draft policies that are sensitive to the needs of diverse communities.

On a broader level, cultural competence requires that boards:

- Have a defined set of values and principles;
- Demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively across cultures;
- Take actions, such as conducting self-assessments, acquiring and institutionalizing cultural knowledge, and adapting to the diversity and cultural contexts of communities;
- Incorporate the above into all aspects of policymaking and implementation; and

- Systematically involve consumers, key stakeholders and communities.

However, developing culturally competent boards is not a seamless process. It is important to be able to recognize some of the key barriers to achieving culturally competent boards. Barriers, specifically those relating to inclusion, awareness, and the need to change and adapt, may be intentional or unintentional. Common barriers include:

- The presumption of entitlement;
- Systems of oppression and historic trauma;
- Unawareness or unwillingness of the need to adapt;
- Historic distrust and misperceptions between different groups;
- Defining issues as black and white;
- Personal baggage that is brought to the situation;
- Differences in perspectives;
- Differences in talking about sensitive issues.

Training on Cultural Competence: One key tool in addressing cultural bias is diversity training. Diversity training is training for the purpose of increasing participants' cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. It is based on the assumption that the training will benefit a board by protecting against civil rights violations, increasing the inclusion of different identity groups, and promoting better teamwork.¹

Each of us looks at the world through filters that are developed based on our own unique experiences. Diversity training helps us learn about those filters and how they impact decisions, work styles, and personal relationships. Diversity training can be provided by an outside organization that specializes in diversity training or by a board member who has expertise in the area.

“For” vs. “With”: Boards that value cultural competency are always striving to ensure that the policies they work on are culturally competent. A common, but ineffective, approach to creating culturally competent policies is doing the work “for” the various communities of focus. This approach ignores some of the key concepts of cultural competency.

Doing work “for” the community is common for a number of reasons. First, it requires no new skills. Second, it allows one’s board to stay inside its comfort zone rather than leaving the comfort zone to engage with folks who we perceive to be different from us.

The second approach is to work “with” the communities of focus. Working “with” the communities of focus will, in the long run, create far more effective policies. This more collaborative approach aligns with a major principle of cultural competence and community engagement – the recognition that communities determine their own needs.

Strategies for Building Cultural Competence: Once you have assessed your board’s level of cultural competency, you may need to access a number of strategies to support board / organization learning and abilities toward cultural proficiency:

- Employ consultants and consumers with expertise in cultural and linguistic competence.
- Partner with local community organizations and agencies representing cultural groups
- Develop and disseminate materials that are adapted culturally and linguistically.
- Actively pursue resource development to continually enhance and expand the Board’s capacities in cultural and linguistic competence.
- Advocate with, and on behalf of, populations who are traditionally un-served and underserved.
- Establish and maintain partnerships with diverse constituency groups to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities.¹

Understanding Diversity and Cultural Competence

Traditionally, many boards and systems operate without the formal input from the people that benefit. In a diverse environment there are alpha groups (dominant or mainstream) and beta, or minority groups. People who are in an alpha group are often unaware of the advantages they may have because the cultural rules benefit them.

Cultural competence is the ability to understand, communicate, and interact effectively with people of different cultures.¹ The culture of a family – such as habits, traditions and foods for example, is another consideration for boards. Cultural competence skills can be applied to individuals, organizations and volunteers (i.e., advocates, board members, etc.) There are four components to cultural competence:

1. Awareness of one's own cultural worldview;
2. Attitude towards cultural differences;

3. Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews; and
4. Cross-cultural skills.

A diverse board includes variance of culture, gender, opinion and perspective. This diversity will ensure a consistent influx of ideas. It is widely recognized that addressing communication and tensions between different groups within your board will improve the overall functioning of your board and result in better teamwork.

As your board begins recruiting diverse families and youth, don't forget that diversity in this context and throughout this chapter means much more than mere race—it means whatever demographic groups are present in the community of focus. This could mean a group as narrow and specific as people with a particular mental illness to a group as broad as women, or young people.

Diversifying Board Membership

Discuss the culture of your group. What are the group norms? How flexible are those norms as new members are brought on. Your board may want to review these norms as part of bringing on new members to ensure an equal voice for all members by being open to needed accommodations to group 'rules'.

The following are strategies to increase diversity in board member recruitment and retention efforts:

- Develop relationships with organizations that cater to the needs and interests of minority and other diverse candidates;
- Participate in diversity awareness training. By participating in diversity training, you can better appreciate the individuality of each and every board member;
- Ensure that your board has a development plan. Having a written development plan will help maximize the board's opportunities to develop cultural competence and attract diversity;
- Communicate key competencies and attributes for success. Potential board members may be unfamiliar with exactly which competencies and attributes are needed to assume positions with increased responsibility;
- Support board members and potential board members in taking advantage of developmental opportunities and make diversity an explicit component of individual leadership development.
- Provide board members an opportunity to be mentored;

- Provide opportunities for formal and informal networking;
- Acknowledge that a diverse and inclusive environment is both realistic and complicated and takes time;
- Develop and deliver a formal presentation on diversity to internal audiences. It's important that your board see and hear discussions of diversity issues;
- Talk about diversity in regular board meetings. It's important that diversity is integrated into the typical operations of the board; and
- Involve visibly diverse board members in outreach efforts.

When diversifying a board, it is important to consider the purpose: it is a good idea for the board to represent the diversity of the individuals affected by the board's decisions. If the board has committees, leadership roles, or other structures to divide up the work, diverse representation needs to be throughout these structures as well.

Once a board has achieved diversity, it is important to know how to manage that diversity to optimize its benefits. Managing diversity focuses on maximizing opportunities for all board members to contribute, enhancing the cultural competence of its policies. Boards need to continually reassess their ability to meet this challenge and may appoint a 'Diversity Officer' to provide this oversight.

Active board leadership and modeling will ensure that the board is a comfortable place for people from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. A Diversity Officer may be appointed and/or board leaders take active measures to interrupt the stereotyping, jokes, rumors and other sorts of behaviors that can set the stage for more harmful expressions later on.

When boards ensure that diversity is valued and effectively managed, they can:

- Build better relationships between members;
- Improve decision-making by promoting an open forum for disagreement among members;
- Stimulate effective team building;
- Expand the ability to change problems into opportunities;
- Promote creativity and innovation;
- Increase board member initiative, camaraderie and morale; and
- Reduce conflict among members.

Individuals and Cultural Competence

Your board may already have individuals who are culturally competent and can serve as *cultural brokers*. Cultural brokers are aware of their own cultural identity, the cultural identity of members of a diverse community or communities, and the social, political and economic factors affecting diverse communities within a particular cultural context. Cultural brokers link, or mediate between groups or persons of differing backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change.¹

Cultural Brokers may be able to:

- Take a leadership role in supporting all board members as they increase their cultural competence.
- Mentor family or youth board members who are from diverse backgrounds to help them acculturate to the board. The mentor will walk the new member through the structure, protocol and requirements of the board.
- Educate board members on how best to enhance policies to be culturally competent and inclusive to meet the needs of those the policy is intended for.

The skills of a cultural broker on your board might include:

- The ability to facilitate self-assessment and process among board members regarding diversity and cultural competency
- An understanding of the values, beliefs and practices associated with illness, health, wellness, and well-being of the cultural group;
- Knowledge of the traditional or indigenous health care networks within a diverse community;
- Knowledge of the medical, health care, and mental health care systems;
- The ability to communicate in two or more languages;
- The ability to interpret and/or translate information from one language to another;
- Knowledge to Interpret and translate the vernacular of the board
- The ability to mediate and manage conflict.

Community Associations

The following list includes Community Associations that have worked hard to advocate for culturally competent practices and lobby for the rights of diverse constituents. Their websites have good suggestions for developing and maintaining cultural competency and equal opportunity administrative practices.

- National Center for Cultural Competency, Georgetown University. <http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/>
- National Urban League. The National Urban League has a study and report called Diversity Practices that Work. This study of more than 5,500 American workers provides new data on the effectiveness of diversity programs. <http://www.nul.org/Publications/PDF/ERAC-NUL.pdf>
- National Organization on Disability. The National Organization on Disability has an excellent set of tips for successful meetings with interpreters. <http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&FeatureID=1075>

Other Resources for Your Board

- Colorado GLBT Bar Association, <http://www.coloradoglbtabar.org/>, Attorney Referral Hotline: 303-282-6524
- Gill Foundation, <http://www.gillfoundation.org/>, 303-292-4455
- Gay & Lesbian Fund for Colorado, http://www.gayandlesbianfund.org/glfchome_show.htm?doc_id=272564, 719-473-4455
- Asian Pacific Development Center, <http://www.apdc.org>, 303-393-0304
- Servicios De La Raza, <http://www.serviciosdelaraza.org/>, 303-458-7088
- Colorado Development Disability Council, <http://www.coddc.org/>, 720-941-0176
- Denver Indian Family Resource Center, <http://www.difrc.org/>, 303-871-8035
- Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Supportive Housing & Homeless Programs, <http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm>, 303-866-7350
- Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. <http://www.coloradocoalition.org/>, 303-293-2217
- The Center for African American Health. <http://www.caahealth.org/page.cfm>, 303-355-3423

Materials and Examples

- ✓ Commitment to Diversity Checklist
- ✓ The Cultural Proficiency Continuum
- ✓ Cultural Competence Self Assessment
- ✓ Cultural Competence Discussion Guide

Please note: The resources provided in this workbook are in no way exhaustive.