

**BEYOND CULTURAL COMPETENCE: WHAT CHILD PROTECTION MANAGERS
NEED TO KNOW AND DO**

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The increasing diversity of communities across the US has compelled human service organizations to design more effective mechanisms to assist individuals and families from different class, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Agencies that primarily serve children must particularly consider their life context. Extensive research in this area documents that children of color are over-represented in child protection caseloads and that racial inequity exists in reporting, decision-making and child removal (Roberts, 2002). At the same time, these agencies must adhere to social and legislative mandates to respond to child abuse and neglect. Also, public and private child welfare services and child protection agencies have come under immense public scrutiny in recent years for many reasons, including being overburdened, slow-paced bureaucracies, with insufficient staff training and resources to counter the rising numbers of “at risk” children.

In addition to the broad legislative mandates to protect children and the policy reforms that these issues oblige us to undertake, practitioners and managers must take leadership in creating more equitable and culturally competent child protection agencies, instead of naively attempting to acculturate clients to majority values (Pina & Canty-Swapp, 1999). This article will discuss a key aspect of systemic change: What is the role of managers in helping agencies move toward culturally competent and equitable service provision? What can managers do to achieve systemic change that is

not overly disruptive in an environment characterized by multiple challenges and restricted resources? We will provide a vision for how managers can help agencies develop culturally relevant, community-based responses to families in crisis and present models for moving in this direction. There are practical as well as artificial challenges to change that need to be addressed.

This article will begin by noting the benefits and costs of systemic change and move on to articulating a vision of culturally competent and equitable service provision for underserved populations within a CPS agency. The next step will be a discussion of how to define culture, since how one defines culture has major implications for structuring cultural competence initiatives. After this there will be an outline of three options for culturally competent management practices: the cultural sensitivity approach, the self-reflective cultural sensitivity approach and the cultural collaboration approach. Each of these models will be described below, with a discussion of the key management tasks and the level of commitment of resources that each model calls for. This will be followed by discussion of the special challenges of achieving staff diversity and a discussion of institutional obstacles and challenges to change. Finally, there will be a brief discussion of the planning and implementation strategies for integrating cultural competence into organizational management.

BENEFITS AND COSTS OF CHANGE

Systematically integrating culturally competent practices into management and service delivery calls for a significant commitment of time and resources from managers and agency staff (Nash, 1999). This commitment must be maintained through sustained changes in many management practices, such as hiring, program design,

service evaluation, policy development and community outreach. Managers should expect to have to make a substantial investment in terms of exercising active leadership, energy, time and organizational resources. On the other hand, the potential gains for engaging in this process are substantial:

An enhanced organizational capacity for flexibility and ongoing innovation.

Increased sophistication in program design and service delivery.

Greater responsiveness to community needs (services are better designed to meet needs of consumers).

Closer ties and communication with diverse communities.

Improving the agency's image and acceptance in the public arena.

The "costs" of change are, to some degree, no different from those incurred in any change process: the need to allocate sufficient staff and management resources to the change process, fear that taking on a new initiative will dilute those parts of the agency's function which are accomplished successfully, apprehension about new roles for managers and concern about bringing in new partners to child protection practice and program development. These are challenges that CPS managers have faced in implementing new initiatives such as family team conferences. (Did I use the right name?) In this arena, there is the additional challenge of bringing in partners who may be suspicious and skeptical of CPS agencies.

Finally, while many agencies have adopted some practices that address diversity, the fact that there are no comprehensive role models for culturally competent child protection agencies may make it easy to overstate the costs and risk of such

initiatives. In order to address this gap in practice, we offer the following example, entitled 'Vision' of how a CPS could function in a different fashion.

VISION

The CPS agency in Almack County¹ has restructured itself to provide better services to the populations it serves. Agency staff approach families with a strong belief that helping people with life challenges (such as the impact of racism, poverty, under- and unemployment, low educational levels, substance abuse, immigration, domestic violence and so on) will be protective for children. They are knowledgeable about a wide range of culturally appropriate services for different client populations. Parents, community residents and cultural affinity organizations now participate in program design and program planning and provide input into agency policies and allocation of resources. Professionals and residents make child abuse/neglect reports to cps only after less intrusive attempts to keep families safe have been exhausted. Neighbors and family members often come together with each other and with service providers to try and avoid CPS reports or to make them jointly. CPS workers do not rapidly remove children unless there have been attempts to help parents develop childcare practices that are congruent with their cultural background. Resources and services to prevent placement are culturally relevant, readily available and comprehensive. When children must be removed, they are placed with kin and immediate measures for reunification are taken, such as family conferencing. When children in Almack County are placed with unrelated foster parents, they very often remain in care for short periods of time.

In practice, child protection workers follow a holistic and cultural strengths approach. First, culturally sensitive support is seen as the primary basis of change,

¹ A hypothetical community.

rather than coercion. Interventions focus on supporting clients in ways that reflect the strengths and resources of their culture and communities (Hill, 1971; Legault, 1996; Lum, 1986; Siegel, 1994). For example, this means that when appropriate, extended family, friends and institutions such as churches and cultural affinity organizations participate in helping parents and children and providing additional resources.

Caseworkers in Almack County are considered partners in the community's strategies to prevent child abuse and to intervene respectfully when incidents occur. Also, CPS workers have become knowledgeable about cultural differences in child-rearing customs. They differentiate between parenting customs that are reflective of mainstream childcare practices in different cultures and practices that are atypical and cause for more acute concern.

How did this happen? First, The CPS agency had to acknowledge its disproportionate impact on communities of color (Roberts, 2002) and immigrant populations, the lack of knowledge about different cultures (Lum, 1986) and lack of connection with different communities. On the other hand, representatives from diverse sectors of the community had to validate a legitimate concern about child abuse and neglect. They had to work out ways of cooperating with CPS while advocating for culturally competent services and for culturally sensitive identification, screening, assessment and service planning practices. A community-CPS council was created in partnership with the executive management of the CPS agency. Creating these relationships was characterized by struggle and by the need to work through mutual mistrust. One of the core tasks of this council was to engage in a frank dialogue about controversial issues such as child rearing and standards of discipline, physical

punishment and restraint in different cultures and to a shared sense of where the line between culturally normative parenting and abuse is.

As this work has proceeded, CPS has made substantial progress in hiring and promoting a more representative staff and there is a firm commitment to continue this initiative. CPS workers and administrators now tend to see themselves as part of the community and are interested in mitigating conditions that may foment child neglect and abuse. There is a strong interest in and funding of prevention campaigns that are designed in collaboration with the community-cps council and there is discussion about developing neighborhood-based projects to help people help each other regarding parenting and other issues.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND MANAGEMENT

DEFINING CULTURE

Developing a vision or a definition of culture sets the boundaries or limits of cultural competence campaigns. Culture is traditionally defined in terms of race, ethnicity and practices and values that are common for certain groups. This includes kin and non-kin network or association patterns, gender roles, traditions and rituals that mark and define life transitions such as birth, marriage and death, religion and spirituality, language, subsistence activities and differing core value orientations (such as individuality/independence, collective interdependence, belief in fate versus individual will, etc.) This is a cultural traits perspective.

Culture can also be defined so as to include life context issues or experiences that many individuals from a given group have lived through due to historical factors.

These shared experiences influence the collective identity of a group and have an impact on individual identity. A list of these experiences includes:

Gender

Age

Sexual orientation

Disability

Widespread exposure to public or intimate violence

Experiences of physical, sexual and/or severe psychological abuse or neglect

Severe deprivation such as hunger or childhood abandonment

Religious affiliation and spirituality

Privileged status

Disadvantaged status

Political and other forms of institutional oppression

Immigration

Many other types of experiences that are common to members of any group could be included. The intention is not to build an ever-expanding list of experiences that differentiate or separate people, but to encourage an awareness of the many factors that could have a lasting and deep impact on service provision. Life context and cultural background introduce many factors that institutions need to take into account, such as adaptive resources and strengths, special vulnerabilities, who one can go to for help, what one can disclose and what types of help will be most readily accepted (Landau, 1982; McGoldrick, 1982; Siegel, 1994). For example, if a child protection worker rings a doorbell, people may respond and experience the encounter in very different ways depending upon their prior experiences with state institutions, their immigration status, sexual orientation, capacity to speak English, their cultural traditions about disclosing

family problems, etc. Likewise, the worker's gender, race, linguistic capacity and cultural knowledge may influence his/her capacity to intervene in a connective fashion.

A definition of culture should also be dynamic (McGoldrick & Giordano, 1996). A static definition of culture tends to reduce culture to sets of enduring traits. It encourages broad generalizations and stereotypes that do not allow for the constant transformation that people and societies undergo. A fluid definition of culture allows for change and attention to individual differences while recognizing the lasting influence of certain experiences.

In conclusion, developing a common definition of culture is crucial to setting the boundaries and the focus of efforts to move toward cultural competence. A broad, inclusive and flexible definition of culture can set the stage for more flexibility, sensitivity and sophistication in service provision.

OPTIONS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Depending on their structure, internal culture and mission, organizations develop different visions of cultural competence. Three models should be considered:

1. The **cultural sensitivity model** primarily involves modifying existing services in order to better meet the needs of target populations. In this model, change focuses on developing a better understanding of the target populations' values and preferences and modifying existing services to "fit" the population. Managers who implement this model must be prepared to take on certain tasks:

- ◆ Organize the acquisition of certain types of knowledge and manage the process of using this knowledge for change. This may call for conducting focus groups or

establishing collaborative relationships with individuals or agencies from target populations.

- ◆ Re-train staff members about target populations.
- ◆ Empower staff members from the target groups who are already on board.
- ◆ Bring in consultants or partner with communities to introduce specific knowledge.
- ◆ Hire more staff (into all levels) from the target populations.
- ◆ Engage staff, consultants and community representatives in modifying or redesigning services

These practices call for different levels of commitment of time and effort from managers. Conducting focus groups is a very limited task that may be engaged in for specific purposes. Focus groups may be assembled and ended rapidly, and their purpose can be to gather input or feedback about a specific matter. The information gathered from focus groups leads into a process of setting certain change/modification priorities for the original service and carrying out the change process. On the other hand, enhancing staff diversity and establishing ongoing collaborative relationships with cultural affinity agencies and community members calls for a more intense and sustained commitment.

2. A **self-reflective cultural sensitivity model** moves beyond a focus learning mostly about the “others.” It involves development of self-consciousness about the culture and values of the organization and of individuals within the organization in order to understand how personal and organizational cultural orientations exert a powerful influence and can act as obstacles or facilitators of change (Pinderhughes, 1989). In other words, a **self-reflective cultural sensitivity model** calls for managers to undertake an ongoing personal and managerial self-inventory. A self-reflective approach recognizes that everyone carries cultural and institutional baggage and that

this baggage can be both a source of strength and a hindrance (Goldberg, 2000). For example, managers may expect job applicants to be assertive both in presenting their qualifications and in demonstrating an ongoing interest in obtaining a position. These expectations may be an obstacle for people from cultures where self-assertiveness is not customary or valued in the same way. Managers who adopt a self-reflective cultural sensitivity model focus on:

- ◆ Cultivating a non-defensive and searching openness about personal and organizational values.
- ◆ Creating an ongoing group inquiry about these issues. Managers must create a safe collegial environment where peers can discuss their implicit values in hiring, staff promotion, standards for parenting and for acceptable marital relationships, etc.
- ◆ Developing an understanding that their work styles and services are value-laden rather than neutral. They are committed to self-awareness in these areas.
- ◆ Designing work teams and planning and service delivery processes that are self-consciously inclusive and diverse. Managers remember that the way tasks are organized and the way services are planned and delivered is not random or neutral. They understand that the results (redesigned services, etc.) communicate values and different types of understanding of the consumers or clients.

3. The **cultural collaboration model** includes all the aspects of the self-reflective cultural sensitivity model and goes further. This approach takes for granted that there is institutional power and privilege vested in managers and in institutions from the dominant culture (McIntosh, 1989 & 1998). It challenges managers to develop practices that undo these advantages and empower other groups. Here are some elements of this model:

- ◆ Cultural competence is expanded from the traditional focus on values and preferences (including issues such as language). It addresses issues such as

oppression, advantage/disadvantage and empowerment/disempowerment. Managers may acknowledge that their institution has historically had an oppressive impact on certain populations and take steps to uncover and remedy such impacts. For example, managers who are sensitive to these issues develop systems to track under- or over-representation of certain groups in programs and services. If the data indicate there is a disproportionate representation of one or more groups, managers can begin an inquiry about the intake referral or screening process or about the service delivery process and staff. Managers can also analyze their own (and their institution's) policy and program development process to see whether they have also contributed to an unwanted outcome.

◆ Managers reexamine the core mission of their institution and expand it so as to acknowledge the interests and needs of targeted populations. It is important to remember that managers do not discard or replace their institution's core mission, but that they supplement the mission. For example, a CPS agency can make a commitment to develop expertise in reaching out to and including fathers (even those who are avoidant or absent) in recognition (a) that in many cultures, men are fundamentally central in family life and little change will occur if they are not included, (b) that many absent men are people who are in a disadvantaged and oppressed position in society. These men can benefit from an approach that recognizes their challenges and helps them overcome them. Service provision with these men can include referrals to education and job training programs, substance abuse treatment and job placement. In this type of effort, managers support staff in creating referral and resource networks for men and establishing alliances with experts in working with men such as responsible fatherhood programs.

◆ Managers bring in people from the target communities as ongoing partners in redesigning services. Managers redefine their own work to include the creation and maintenance of these relationships. These efforts are well organized and consistent rather than sporadic. They become a core management function, so fewer and fewer decisions are made without consultation with partners.

◆ Managers create evaluation and feedback mechanisms to measure program impact and collect data for program redesign (Freeman, 1994). This process should be

carried out through majority/minority collaborative groups. It can incorporate broad questions such as: Do our programs and services enhance protective factors within different cultures and families? Do our programs provide culturally appropriate services to mitigate risk factors for child abuse and family instability? Do our programs enhance community and kin/friendship support systems and services?

◆ Managers make an ongoing effort to name and undo their personal and institutional privilege. They work to develop an understanding of their privilege as members of a majority group and as members of an empowered administrative group within an executive hierarchy. They do not take for granted that others can perceive and accept their willingness to share power. They repeatedly affirm this willingness and practice it by asking for suggestions, by constantly creating consultative forums where they listen with respect and by reflecting that attention back to participants. They are not surprised if people of color or others are angry, inhibited or fearful with them because of the internalized impact of majority/minority relations. They develop ways to inquire about and mitigate these effects. They are transparent about the difficulty of change and about their own limits as managers within an institution that expects certain types of performance and that has its own boundaries about change and sharing power.

◆ Managers take responsibility for creating safe and supportive environments for examining their personal and institutional privilege. Sometimes it is necessary to have an environment where people who have similar institutional privilege and similar types of racial/class/gender and other types of privilege can safely discuss these issues with each other. Many people are not clear about their privileged status and have a strong sense of vulnerability and guilt in this area. There may also be competitiveness and a fear of loss of status or a loss of perceived competence. On the other hand, naming and uncovering privileged attitudes and acts (or omissions) together can be a very supportive source of relief and of self-acceptance. Developing an environment where managers can talk to each other frankly and searchingly about their privileged status and provide support to each other in this process may require outside facilitation.

◆ Likewise, people who are not from privileged groups, particularly those who are employees within an organization, may need to meet together for support, problem-solving and mutual empowerment. They may have a constant struggle to name issues

and to avoid silence. Managers can facilitate the process of staff meeting together by releasing staff time for this purpose and viewing this as an essential task.

◆ The possibility of deeper modifications or transformations of services, products and organization of tasks arises. Majority/minority collaborative groups may envision profound changes in services and in service delivery. Managers need to approach these deeper transformations with caution and with careful planning. Does it make sense to develop more manageable pilot projects? How does one measure the impact of redesigned systems? How does one obtain support and validation for these efforts within a larger institution? How does one make the case that the core mission is still central? What has worked well in the past? What should be kept unchanged? What needs to be changed?

STAFF DIVERSITY

It is important to underscore staff diversity as a key building block for all efforts to achieve systemic change toward racial equity and cultural competence. Managers who want to develop a diverse staff need to make realistic assessments of the commitment of time and effort it will take to achieve desired results. Employing staff members from diverse populations may call for sustained outreach to cultural affinity organizations and a thorough examination of hiring qualifications and interviewing process to remove unintended obstacles to hiring capable candidates. Managers should recognize that some staff members from other cultures might not behave in the same way or have the same skill sets as staff that are from the dominant culture. Staff members from minority or underrepresented groups may be much more capable at communicating with certain communities and may bring in different and unique perspectives in policy development, service provision and outreach. Managers should recognize these different strengths as unique skill sets that add value to the organization. Conversely, a demonstrated capacity to do outreach and engage effectively with minority communities may become

a valued skill set or asset for applicants from the majority culture. Furthermore, staff diversity cannot be maintained (and will not become self-perpetuating) through hiring a few individuals who end up feeling isolated. Managers should work with existing employees to insure that they welcome and integrate the new staff. Finally, staff diversity needs to be targeted at every organizational level. A sense of isolation and alienation will be created if after a prolonged time minority employees remain clustered in direct service positions. Managers need to think of staff diversity in terms of vertical integration of the workplace. The development and maintenance of staff diversity must become a core task for managers and must be viewed as an ongoing process.

In summary, there are various approaches to moving toward culturally competent management. All of these approaches call for a conscious and sustained commitment of resources, and managers should take this issue into account as they decide how to move forward. Change can be more limited in scope as in the cultural sensitivity approach or it can be more comprehensive, as in the cultural collaboration approach. There is no single avenue toward change, but all the avenues will challenge managers and prove to be an opportunity for professional growth and increased effectiveness and flexibility.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Child protection managers face multiple stressors that can be seen as permanent obstacles to change or as challenges to be overcome as they move beyond cultural competence. Child protection is an over-burdened, under-resourced system. It is driven by crises and constant media criticism about its decisions. Managers often bear the brunt of public outrage along with front line staff when child fatalities occur.

Sometimes the result is dismissal or demotion. In this context some of the reactions managers may experience are:

- ◆ Fear that doing things differently will result in harm to children.
- ◆ Fear of sharing decision-making power, but being held solely responsible for the outcome.
- ◆ Anger at public ostracism of child protection staff.
- ◆ Lack of trust that partnership with ethnically different communities will be successful.
- ◆ Fear that they will be accused of ignoring risk and as favoring or privileging particular ethnicities or communities.

In addition, managers are subject to the restrictions of a hierarchical bureaucracy, yet must maintain certain core responsibilities. Some of the issues they must contend with while moving toward racial equity and inclusion are:

- ◆ Meeting legislative mandates and timeframes with limited time, staff and resources.
- ◆ Recruiting, training and retaining competent staff.
- ◆ Supervising young, often inexperienced staff to respond to complex, high-risk cases.
- ◆ Turnover of senior level leadership to articulate the vision and carry out long-term change
- ◆ Lack of communication among management levels.
- ◆ Lack of internal structure to address difficult internal and external issues.
- ◆ Creating new services and programs with rigid funding guidelines.
- ◆ Having to implement Federal policies, such as ASFA, that are incongruent with cultural competence.

Lastly, individual values and attitudes may be an obstacle to change for some managers, including:

- ◆ Entrenched stereotypic views of certain racial and ethnic communities.
- ◆ Beliefs that attribute child protection involvement to individual or family pathology.

Once an approach is chosen, challenges such as those discussed above must be surfaced from the experience of the managers involved in the change. Addressing

the context of child protection, organizational obstacles and individual obstacles will help prioritize immediate needs and begin the process of implementation.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Just as there is no roadmap for cultural competence approaches (Nash, 1999), there is no set course for developing a strategic plan for cultural competence. A plan is useful for a variety of reasons: many decisions will have to be made for allocation of resources, a strategic initiative usually has to address and coordinate activities in multiple areas (hiring, program development and service delivery, community outreach, etc.) and managers have to set priorities about which issues and underserved populations need to be addressed first.

A strategic plan should begin with an exercise to help participants develop their own **definition of culture**, since this creates a common language and creates awareness of populations and issues that need to be addressed. This is followed by an **organizational cultural competence self-assessment** process that identifies strengths and areas that need to be addressed. This can be thought of as a diagnostic organizational self-inventory. Self-assessment also needs to help managers and staff members identify their strengths as well as the skills and knowledge that they need to enhance. The next step is to have managers, staff and other collaborators engage in a **vision process**. This process usually involves asking managers and agency staff broad questions such as these:

“Given our assessment of where our organization is with respect to cultural competence, where would we like to be five years from now? How would we like our work and our organization to be different?”

Participants should be encouraged to be ambitious and broad in their thinking. There should be no attempt to prioritize or critique ideas at this time. It is also helpful to place potential obstacles in an “**environmental factors**” list. Environment factors can vary. There can be a severe lack of job applicants from target populations; a history of mistrust by agencies or individuals from underserved populations; a lack of funding or staffing to carry out new initiatives; other agencies that feel threatened by a cultural competence initiative and attempt to undermine the process. It is crucial to consider such potential obstacles as issues that need to be addressed in the strategic plan rather than to allow them to short-circuit the vision process. Establishing an environmental factors list is essential.

Once the vision process is completed, there is usually a **goal setting and planning process** in which organizations translate and prioritize their broader vision into a limited number of concrete goals. The goal-setting process involves intense internal dialogue (and possibly discussion with organizational allies) since the end product should be a detailed plan that allocates resources and responsibilities and sets timelines are set for the fulfillment of a limited number of concrete goals. At the end of the goal-setting and planning process there should be a clear sense in staff and management of the goals of the cultural competence campaign, a clear understanding of each person’s role and of the resources they will have for this purpose. In the **implementation phase** timelines and progress are monitored and there may be ongoing revision of goals and activities depending upon changes in resources, successes and special obstacles encountered. As the plan proceeds and more

partners and allies participate, there is an opportunity to expand the range of feedback to refine and enrich the sophistication of the plan.

Conclusion

Again, there is no standard model for cultural competence. Managers can choose not to pursue these types of strategies for institutional change and program development at the risk of further alienating the communities they serve. On the other hand, developing and implementing a strategic plan for cultural competence and racial equity can help agencies become more sophisticated and gain public support, despite the commitment and allocation of resources these efforts require.

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