

Adapted from: *Cultural Proficiency* by Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri Robins, and Raymond D. Terrell (Corwin Press, 1999, 2003), and *Culturally Proficient Instruction* by Kikanza Nuri Robins, Randall B. Lindsey, Delores B. Lindsey, and Raymond D. Terrell (Corwin Press, 2001)

## CULTURAL PROFICIENCY: WHAT IS IT?

Cultural proficiency is a way of being that allows individuals and organizations to interact effectively with people who differ from them. It is a developmental approach for addressing the issues that emerge in diverse environments. In 1989, Terry Cross, Executive Director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association, in Portland, Oregon, published a monograph that changed many lives. *Toward A Culturally Competent System Of Care*<sup>1</sup> provides several tools for addressing the responses to diversity that we have encountered in our work. Although Dr. Cross addressed the issues of difference in mental health care, his seminal work has been the basis of a major shift in responding to difference in organizations across the country.

We like this approach for several reasons: it is proactive; it provides tools that can be used in any setting, rather than techniques that are applicable in only one environment; the focus is behavioral not emotional; and it can be applied to both organizational practices and individual behavior. Most diversity programs are used to explain the nature of diversity or the process of learning about or acquiring new cultures. This is an approach for responding to the environment shaped by its diversity. It is not an off-the-shelf program that an organization implements through training. It is not a series of mechanistic steps that everyone must follow. It is a model for shifting the culture of the organization—it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change. There are four tools for developing one's cultural proficiency.

### THE CONTINUUM

Language for describing both healthy and non-productive policies, practices and individual behaviors

### THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Five behavioral standards  
for measuring, and planning for, growth toward cultural proficiency

### THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Underlying values of the approach

### THE BARRIERS

Caveats that assist in responding effectively to resistance to change

One of the most effective and productive ways to address diversity within organizations is an approach known as *cultural proficiency*. In an organization, it is the policies and practices,

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about the concept and its applications in *Cultural Proficiency* by Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri Robins, and Raymond D. Terrell (Corwin Press, 1999, 2003), and *Culturally Proficient Instruction* by Kikanza Nuri Robins, Randall B. Lindsey, Delores B. Lindsey, and Raymond D. Terrell (Corwin Press, 2001)

in an individual, the values and behaviors that enable that agency or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Cultural proficiency is reflected in the way an organization treats its employees, its clients and its community. In a culturally proficient organization, the culture of the organization promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about and for responding appropriately to differences. Rather than lamenting, “Why can’t *they* be like *us*?” managers and staff welcome and create opportunities to better understand who they are as individuals, while learning how to interact positively with people who differ from themselves.

Cultural proficiency is an inside-out approach that focuses first on those of us who are insiders to the organization, encouraging us to reflect on our own individual understandings and values. It thereby relieves those identified as outsiders, the members of the excluded groups, from the responsibility of doing all the adapting. As an approach to the issues that arise in a diverse environment, cultural proficiency surprises many people, who expect a program to teach them about other people, not about themselves. This inside-out approach acknowledges and validates the current values and feelings of people, encouraging change without threatening people’s feelings of worth.

While cultural proficiency prizes individuals, it focuses chiefly on the organization’s culture, which has a life force beyond the individuals within the organization. This focus removes the needs both to place blame on individuals and to induce feelings of guilt. The process involves all members of the organization’s community in determining how to align policies, practices, and procedures in order to achieve cultural proficiency. Because all of the participants are deeply involved in the developmental process, there is broader based ownership, making it easier for them to commit to change. This approach attacks the problems caused by the diversification of staff or clients at a systemic level.

Building cultural proficiency requires informed and dedicated managers and staff, committed and involved leadership, and time. Educators cannot be sent to training for two days and be expected to return with solutions to all of the equity issues in their schools. For instance, this approach does *not* involve the use of simple checklists for identifying culturally significant characteristics of individuals, which may be politically appropriate, but socially and educationally meaningless. The transformation to cultural proficiency requires time to think, reflect, assess, decide, and change. To become culturally proficient, managers and staff participate actively in work sessions, contributing their distinctive ideas, beliefs, feelings, and perceptions. Consequently, their contributions involve them deeply in the process and make it easier for them to commit to change.

If you are truly committed to becoming a caring and inclusive community, you can use the tools of cultural proficiency to make this transformation through sustainable systemic change. The culturally proficient organization closes the door on tokenism and stops the revolving door through which highly competent, motivated people enter briefly and exit quickly because they have not been adequately integrated into the organization’s culture. Culturally

proficient educators can confidently deliver programs and services, knowing that faculty, staff, parents and students genuinely want and can readily receive them without having their cultural connections denied, offended, or threatened. Culturally proficient organizations can also be sure that their community perceives them as a positive, contributing force that substantively enhances the community's image and the organization's position in it.

### **The Continuum**

There are six points along the cultural proficiency continuum that indicate unique ways of seeing and responding to difference:

- **Cultural destructiveness:** *See the difference, stomp it out*  
The elimination of other people's cultures
- **Cultural incapacity:** *See the difference, make it wrong:*  
Belief in the superiority of one's culture and behavior that disempowers another's culture
- **Cultural blindness:** *See the difference, act like you don't:*  
Acting as if the cultural differences you see do not matter or not recognizing that there are differences among and between cultures
- **Cultural pre-competence:** *See the difference, respond inadequately*  
Awareness of the limitations of one's skills or an organization's practices when interacting with other cultural groups
- **Cultural competence:** *See the difference, understand the difference that difference makes*  
Interacting with other cultural groups using the five essential elements of cultural proficiency as the standard for individual behavior and organizational practices
- **Cultural proficiency:** *See the differences and respond effectively in a variety of environments*  
Esteeming culture; knowing how to learn about individual and organizational culture; interacting effectively in a variety of cultural environments

### **The Essential Elements**

The essential elements of cultural proficiency provide the standards for individual behavior and organizational practices.

- Name the differences: **Assess Culture**
- Claim the differences: **Value Diversity**
- Reframe the differences: **Manage the Dynamics of Difference**
- Train about differences: **Adapt to Diversity**
- Change for differences: **Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge**

## **The Guiding Principles**

These are the core values, the foundation upon which the approach is built.

- Culture is a predominant force; you cannot NOT be influenced by culture.
- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
- People have individual and group identities that they want to have acknowledged.
- Cultures are not homogeneous; there is diversity within groups.
- The unique needs of every culture must be respected.

## **The Barriers**

- **The presumption of entitlement**  
Believing that all of the personal achievements and societal benefits that you have, were accrued solely on your merit and the quality of your character.
- **Systems of Oppression**  
Throughout most organizations are systems of institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. Moreover these systems are often supported and sustained without the permission of and at times without the knowledge of the people whom they benefit. These systems perpetuate domination and victimization of individuals and groups.
- **Unawareness of the need to adapt**  
Not recognizing the need to make personal and organizational changes in response to the diversity of the people with whom you and your organization interact. Believing instead, that only the others need to change and adapt to you.