

Cultural Competency and Sensitivity

Cultural competence consists of the knowledge and interpersonal skills that help people better understand, appreciate and work with individuals from cultures other than their own. Culture does not just refer just to nationality. It can refer to ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and many other factors. As individuals with varying experiences, we all have different levels of competence when it comes to effectively communicating with, interacting with and understanding people who represent cultures different from our own.

The following information is provided to help trainers effectively engage with the populations (foreign-born and native-born) with whom you will be working. From novice to seasoned professional, cultural competence is always a lesson in progress. The following tips may prove helpful when facilitating conversations that require cultural competence and sensitivity:

1. **Use the Platinum Rule.** We are all familiar with the Golden Rule: “Treat others as you would wish to be treated.” Following the Golden Rule is an essential first step in building community. When bridging cultures, there is an added rule that is important to follow: the Platinum Rule states, “Treat others the way they wish to be treated.” This means, your perspective or beliefs aside, it is important to learn and acknowledge others’ feelings, experiences and opinions. When we treat others in a way that is not based on our own assumptions about their experiences, we learn how to interact with others in a truly helpful and respectful way.
2. **Be aware of generalizations and of categorizing people into groups.** In other words, do not assume anything! Part of the beauty of this work is learning to understand and appreciate different cultures, perspectives and experiences, even if we think we have an exhaustive understanding of others. Try to avoid jumping to conclusions or making assumptions about individuals. Also try to avoid assumptions about others’ cultural origins. Rather, engage, listen and experience what others offer. Simply ask about heritage and history—what you discover will amaze and perhaps even inspire you. Finally, be careful with terms related to ethnicity. Terms such as “Latino” or “Hispanic” or “African American” may not be preferred by everyone we think they apply to, and may not even be accurate.
3. **Do not be afraid to ask questions.** The best policy is to ask clarifying questions. Of course you will want to proceed sensitively and gently, choosing appropriate questions and avoiding any pressure to answer. As the group establishes rapport, participants will naturally become more comfortable sharing personal information.

- 4. Sensitivity about matters of immigration status is particularly important.** This includes asking foreign-born persons if they “have papers” or are “documented.” Unless you have developed a very close relationship with someone or have been hired to represent someone as an attorney, it is almost never appropriate to ask someone about her or his immigration status or means of entrance into the country. Immigration is complicated. There are many legal ways that people can live, work and remain in this country without being citizens or green card holders. It is inaccurate to assume that people who are not green card holders are undocumented. It is also inappropriate to assume anything about individuals’ immigration status or what may be implied if they do not wish to share that information.
- 5. English is not the official language of the United States.** While English is recognized as the United States’ dominant language, it has never been declared the official language. Many states have passed laws establishing English as the official language in their respective jurisdictions, but federally funded health care providers in those states are still required to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Title VI requires that federally funded health care programs ensure that non-English speakers have equal access to information and services. Federally funded health care providers must supply documents in multiple languages. These providers must also provide interpretation services either in person or by telephone. Some health care providers simply rely on clients to provide their own interpreters, usually family members. This practice is inappropriate, and if the hospital or clinic received federal funding, it is also illegal.

- 6. It is helpful to understand the difference between translation and interpretation.** An interpreter is someone who orally converts a message from one language to another. A translator is someone who converts a written message into another language, in writing. In other words, oral=interpretation; written=translation. Each function represents a different skill set, and many professionals specialize in one, not both.

If at all possible (and sometimes it is not), it always better to have a trained interpreter work with a client. On the surface, it may seem like the logical choice for a family member to interpret. However, family members are often not used to or familiar with complicated terminology. And particularly in health-related matters they may feel uncomfortable explaining personal issues to medical staff or to the patient.

It is in everyone’s best interests to avoid using children as interpreters. Not only does this set up a potentially awkward power dynamic, but children often do not have the vocabulary to interpret complex or technical information. Professionally trained interpreters are familiar with industry-specific vocabulary, positioning and communication techniques.

- 7. Learning cultural competence involves more than developing an attitude of “Let’s just all get along and tolerate each other.”** Cultural competence skills allow us to learn, appreciate and understand the cultural differences we bring into any interaction with another person. As we grow in cultural competence, we gain a clearer understanding of our own worldviews, attitudes, beliefs and opinions. We also expand our knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews and develop cross-cultural skills that allow us to

effectively interact with people from other cultures. Cultural competence is not just about tolerance; cultural competence skills help shape our behaviors so that we may work and interact effectively and respectfully with others.

There are four components necessary for developing cultural competence:

- **Awareness**—Being aware of your personal reactions to those who are different from you
- **Attitude**—Being aware of your cultural bias and beliefs while also closely examining your beliefs and values about cultural differences.
- **Knowledge**—Learning about various cultural practices and learning to identify where personal behaviors are inconsistent with personal values and beliefs about equality.
- **Skills**—Practicing behaviors, attitudes and values that allow effective communication in multicultural settings.

Cultural competence is always a process. We are all at various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills, and no individual or organization has attained perfect understanding of other cultures. But as we think intentionally about these issues, everyone benefits as we stretch ourselves and grow in our ability to relate to one another.