

Developing a Culture of Change

Developing an action plan for change intended to address diversity issues can pose significant challenges to all levels of an organization. Change of this sort is often a slow process, depending on the “**culture**” of the institution and its general responsiveness to change. Furthermore, highlighting diversity issues often raises awareness of, and questions about, institutional values, attitudes and beliefs, questions that need to be discussed and addressed during the planning stages. Dialogue among an organization’s members about their values, attitudes and beliefs is essential if the changes being made are to be both meaningful and sustainable.

It is important to keep the following four principles for goals and actions in mind as you embark on this change:

Social justice includes respect, dignity, fairness, equality, acceptance and valuing people who are diverse in their cultures and backgrounds. Social justice advocates work towards inclusiveness in both organizations and communities, and strive to bring about the elimination of discrimination. Social justice is a fundamental principle for organizational change work.

Learning works best when it is enjoyable and interactive and succeeds in avoiding confrontation and assigning blame. Learning about diversity can be challenging and uncomfortable at times as it often leads to the exploration of critical and sensitive issues; however, we believe that education and training should respect the individual and make every effort to be non-threatening in the teaching and learning environments provided.

Professional development is an integral part of implementing plans for change. All levels of an organization need access to professional development and training in order to understand and explore concepts, issues and future directions.

Action plans are systemic; no aspect of an organization operates in isolation. Therefore, in order for change to be effective, there must be commitment to diversity throughout the organization. Also, ripple effects from this interconnectedness must be taken into account when beginning to identify probable outcomes of, and possible barriers to, the proposed work.

Definitions

Access: The ability, opportunity and means to approach, consult, and utilize an organization’s services and organizational structure. In the context of diversity, accessibility “is about voice, representation and participation in all aspects of organizational systems for people who have been traditionally excluded from programs and institutions.” (Mukherjee, 1991)

Barriers: Real and/or perceived obstacles and problems which limit or impede equal access to, and participation in, any service or program. These impediments usually can be linked to communications, services, practices and policies that do not meet, or are unable to respond to, the needs of staff and patients who are outside of the predominant culture of the organization.

Cultural Competency/Sensitivity: Awareness of one's own cultural assumptions, biases, behaviours and beliefs, and the knowledge and skills to interact with and understand people from other cultures without imposing one's own cultural values on them. Cultural competency/sensitivity is required at both an individual level and at systemic, professional and organizational levels.

Culture: Patterns of learned behaviours and values that are shared among members of a group, are transmitted to group members over time, and distinguish the members of one group from another. Culture can include: ethnicity, language, religion and spiritual beliefs, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, age, sexual orientation, geographic origin, group history, education and upbringing, and life experiences.

Diversity: A broad term used to reflect the unique characteristics of us all. Its components include race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, place of origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities/qualities, socioeconomic status/class, education, language, family and marital status, religious beliefs, political beliefs, and criminal background.

Inclusive Organizations: These organizations understand, accept and respect all aspects of diversity. They involve people who are reflective of the diverse groups in the community – in the development of policies, services and programs which are appropriate and relevant to them. (Cross, 1989).

Organizational/Institutional Change: The process by which the goals of an inclusive, multicultural, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory organization may be achieved. It is usually built around the activities of Change Agents or Change Teams, who seek to bring about changes in human resources, organizational systems, and the policies, programs, and services of an institution or organization (Chan, 1997).

Participation: the opportunity to become genuinely involved, in both organizations and society, on an equal footing with all others, and to feel valued for the skills, talents, knowledge and experience which the individual brings as a customer, client, employee or volunteer.