

GUIDE TO CULTURAL AWARENESS

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Tips for Becoming Culturally Aware, Acknowledging Other Cultures, and Affirming the Value of Other Cultures

Think Beyond Race and Ethnicity.

Opportunities to expand our cultural understanding exist everywhere, especially when we consider culture beyond its association with ethnicity. Culture is central to our identity and, as such, may be seen or unseen by others. Culture is shaped by personal experiences that may include ethnic and racial identity, religion, age, educational level, body size, heritage and family tradition, physical and cognitive abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographic and socio-economic experiences.

Think outside your own box.

We are influenced by our own values, beliefs, biases, and life experiences. We need to carefully consider how our perspectives effect our understanding of other cultures and avoid making assumptions about others based on our own experiences. Explore your experiences of power privilege, and marginality to discover how these experiences could impact your interactions with others. Becoming culturally aware starts with recognizing the limitations of our own culture.

Experience culture.

Consider experiential ways that you can learn about other cultures and endeavor to participate in activities that may not be familiar to you. When possible, take part in social, community, and educational activities like viewing films and reading books, attending faith-based services, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, art exhibits, workshops, and lectures. Make relationships within the community prior to a crisis.

Use language that evokes images of people actively engage in life when work with people with disabilities.

Avoid phrases that suggest helplessness or tragedy. For example, "Bob uses a wheelchair" versus "Bob is in a wheelchair."

Listen Carefully.

Hearing is not necessarily listening. Our own perceptions, biases, and expectations sometimes make it difficult to really listen to and comprehend the overt and covert messages. Be mindful to focus on and identify the information being conveyed.

Learn by asking.

People feel respected when others are genuinely interested in learning about their views and perspectives. Consider incorporating questions into conversations that demonstrate your desire to learn more about others' cultural experiences. Use simple or open-ended questions that encourage dialogue. For example, "What do you think?," "How can I be of assistance to you?," "What information is important for me to know about you and your culture?," "If I was a member of your community, how would I most likely react to/cope with this situation?," and "What does 'help' look like here?"

Avoid insensitive comments.

In group contexts, individuals sometimes make insensitive and hurtful comments about others (e.g., jokes, slurs). Do not reinforce this behavior. If comfortable in the group context, make known your discomfort with what has been said and ask that no more insensitive comments be made.

Tune in to non-verbal behaviors

Sometimes, behaviors can provide more details about how someone is reacting to a situation than what they may be comfortable saying. It is important to recognize welcoming behaviors as well as those that may be defensive so that you can adjust your approach accordingly. Similarly, be aware of your own body language. Does standing while others are sitting demonstrate authority or aggressiveness? Try to match others' preferences for personal space and body positioning.

Expand your comfort zone.

It is likely that there will be individuals or cultural groups with whom you do not have experience working. Acknowledge this challenge and make an effort to learn as much as possible about the individual or group to build your confidence and benefit your outreach. Ask questions to make it clear that you want to learn more and deliver information in a way that is useful.

Make local connections.

What community-based organizations and venues are respected and trusted by those with whom you work? Organizations or groups like social clubs, advocacy groups, religious institutions or other spiritual groups, civic groups, unions, colleges, and universities can help you deliver your messages in a forum that is relevant to your audience. In some cases, you may want to partner with leaders from these organizations or groups to help you communicate even more effectively.

Exchange stories.

Storytelling and personal sharing are important communication techniques that transcend most cultures. Consider sharing relevant personal stories as a way to start a conversation or build rapport.

Respect language preferences.

Before approaching a new group of people, consider whether the materials you have to offer, or your presentation need to be adapted to ensure that you are understood. In some cases, it might be necessary to translate materials or invite an interpreter to the presentation. Other times, such as when communicating with young children, simply adjusting your vocabulary might suffice.

Honor flexibility in people's self-identification.

We may make assumptions about people's cultural identity while they may have an entirely different perception of themselves. Listen for information about self-perception. For example, do they consider themselves as having a spouse or a life partner? People may identify with a particular aspect of their diversity at different times (e.g., being a lesbian may be very salient in some circumstances but not in others).