

Building Cultural Competency in Community Domestic Violence Programs

A Guide for the Grantees of the Washington State Office of Crime
Victims Advocacy

Thomas D. Lonner, Ph.D.

Strategies: Governance and Management

Cultural competency by an agency, on behalf of its clients and community, is the end result of important preceding steps. These steps integrate the values and actions of all parts of the agency together. Like other important competencies, such as dedication to quality services, cultural competency should pervade every part of the organization; each part should also support all others. Governance and Management is one of those fundamental parts.

Governance and Management is that part of agency life where the organization states its purpose, mission, and objectives to itself, its staff, its volunteers, and its community. Only certain people have the authority and responsibility to deal with this most basic aspect of agency life; these are usually reserved for board members and the executive director. Their collective values and purposes are melded into the agency's mission statement, long-range plan, short-range plans, and policies and procedures.

These documents combine into the overall blueprint that determines how the agency will organize its efforts to reach its objectives. They shape organizational structure, reporting, staffing, funding, training, supervision, services, and community relations.

Mission Statement and Goals

The world inside and outside of sexual assault agencies is changing rapidly – newly perceived concerns; new theories of intervention and prevention; new funding and staffing levels; new mandated requirements; new board and staff members; new volunteers; changing community awareness, tolerance, and reporting patterns; and changing community demographics.

In order for the agency to match itself to these changes, the agency mission statement needs to be revisited on a regular basis.

It is recommended that the board formally review the agency mission statement on an annual basis, at a minimum. This will remind all new and old board members of the purposes and objectives of their work and the need to monitor agency performance against each of these objectives. The bylaws of the agency should be modified to reflect this annual task. A board officer should be charged with making sure the mission statement is placed on the agenda. If there is a regular annual meeting, retreat, or some other signal event for the board each

year, close consideration of the mission statement should be scheduled at that time. Any changes to the mission statement should be communicated to all members of the agency.

It is recommended that, prior to annual board consideration, the agency staff be invited to recommend changes to the mission statement based on their day-to-day perceptions and experiences of the real life of the agency. Language in the mission statement or objectives that do not reflect this reality or the resources of the agency should be examined closely and modified as required. Overly ambitious, wishful, or “pie in the sky” expectations should not be included in the mission statement as they diminish its real function as a blueprint for the agency. Like laws on the books that are never enforced, these expectations diminish the force of the mission statement.

It is recommended that the agency’s real intentions about cultural competency be stated in the mission statement. While the board has the responsibility to formulate these intentions, it is recommended that the board seek advice from the various communities it intends to serve about what they perceive as needed and desired by their communities. This would align the board’s statements with the reality.

Since it takes some time for agencies to make concrete advances in cultural competency, the mission statement should identify objectives that are realistic, given the size, skills, and resources of the agency. It is quite acceptable to have modest goals, as long as the agency intends to commit resources to them. The mission statement should not include objectives toward which it does not intend to commit resources.

While the mission statement states these objectives in general terms, there is commonly a long-range plan which stipulates what the true measurable goals, benchmarks, methods, assignments, timelines, and resources are to make progress toward those objectives. Your agency may not call it a long-range plan, but there is commonly some form of management tool by which the executive director keeps the board informed and tracks the progress of programs and staff.

If your agency does not have such management tools to link the mission to the day-to-day actions and decisions of the agency, it is recommended that you acquire them. Every sexual assault program has a wealth of local resources to assist in this process. There are numerous books on management in your local library. The United Way and other not-for-profit agencies and foundations have materials that are meant for programs identical to yours. Local academic institutions and business organizations have persons who would be happy to share their expertise with you.

To the degree that your agency specifically addresses culturally competency in its mission statement, there should be a section in the long-range plan that addresses

this ambition in appropriate detail. This will be modified over time by the board as obstacles are encountered, strategies are changed, and progress is made. It is recommended that the long-range plan be reviewed annually by the board, to remind itself of its goals and to track progress toward these goals.

Board of Directors

Aside from the legal and financial mandates that underpin sexual assault agencies, each agency's Board of Directors has the responsibility to shape the organization to match the community that it serves, to assure that its limited resources are properly applied to the specific needs of that community. As noted throughout this Guide, the community is composed of numerous communities, each with needs of its own. Lack of representation on or to the Board of Directors by one or more of these communities diminishes the Board's ability to see and respond to their needs.

It is recommended that the Board adopt policies and procedures to increase the likelihood of sub-community representation on or to the Board. These policies and procedures may include:

- increasing the number of Board seats to accommodate these communities
- altering the screening of prospective Board applicants to select for sub-community representation
- constructing a community advisory committee to the Board, from which future Board members can be recruited
- assigning specific Board vacancies to these sub-communities
- establishing ties to sub-communities to solicit good applicants from within their membership
- adding community members to the Board's nomination and selection committees
- adding questions specific to culture to the Board interview process
- advertising Board vacancies aggressively in the cultural communities
- avoiding filling of Board vacancies by invitation or word-of-mouth solicitation to friends and associates
- providing routine training on cultural competence to members
- supporting these Board members in coming to meetings, stating their views safely, participating in decisions, and retaining their seats
- monitoring the members' completion of terms
- conducting exit interviews by a third party when a Board member resigns his/her seat or declines re-appointment
- holding members accountable for behaviors and statements considered culturally inappropriate

It is recommended that Board receive all necessary materials in measuring progress toward cultural competency goals. The Board may assign the specific responsibility for monitoring performance in this area to a Board committee composed of persons with a special interest or expertise in this area and that one

or more Board's executive committee, if one exists, sit on this committee to ensure that the voice of the committee is heard by the entire executive committee, if any, and the Board as a whole.

Management

Management is that part of the agency that is responsible, on a day-to-day basis, for applying resources and direction to the staff and volunteers and for carrying out the desires of the Board. In many organizations, the Board is far weaker than management in establishing direction and policy, because 1) the Board has assigned this responsibility or 2) the Board has not elected to exercise its strength or 3) managers have kept the Board at some distance from the internal operations of the agency. In terms of cultural competency, the relative balance between Board and management is important because 1) all parts of the organization must embrace and have a role in cultural competency and 2) the Board is in a unique position to develop relationships with various communities.

Both the Board and management have monitoring and oversight responsibility for goals such as increased cultural competency.

Since some of the agency's progress toward cultural competency goals are assigned to the agency's staff, it is recommended that the Executive Director be held accountable by the Board, on an annual basis, for the agency's efforts as outlined in the long-range plan. This can be done as part of the annual review of agency progress on the long-range plan or the routine review of the Executive Director's performance.

The Executive Director in sexual assault programs commonly has some form of management team, whether program managers or supervisors. These managers, representing the most professional and senior parts of the staff, collectively constitute the program's "culture." They convey, through orientation, training, supervision, mentoring, role modeling, and performance review and reward, the values, practices, and behaviors of the agency.

It is recommended that, in the management plan that implements the long-range plan, the Executive Director and management team develop specific annual goals and measures to 1) ascertain that all managers are in accord on cultural competency efforts and performance, 2) receive training and other supports as necessary to achieve accord, and 3) apply consistent performance goals, supports, and measures to staff and volunteer work.

Agency

For many agencies, instituting cultural competency objectives and goals will require the agency to change in some significant way, either what it intends to do or how it intends to do it. Significant change requires the understanding and support of management and

understanding and active participation of staff and volunteers. Independent activity by only part of the Board, management, staff, or volunteers will not produce deep and abiding change throughout the agency.

Different parts of any agency need to shape certain aspects of their work in order to feel productive and “in control.” “Top-down” mandates may be counter-productive in getting all parts of the agency to pull together toward a common objective. They may undercut advances made in different parts of the agency, damage relationships among them, and isolate individuals.

Finally, there are often structural aspects of the agency that act to impede change. Every agency has a history in which certain initiatives have succeeded while others have failed. The stories of these initiatives contain important clues about what individuals and the agency must have or do to make progress. Some of these are suggested in questions G26 and G27 in the assessment tool. There are, no doubt, many others. It is important that key persons, particularly if they are new to the agency or not within management, are apprised of these factors before they begin, to avoid the avoidable pitfalls that stymied other efforts and to build on what has proved successful in the past.

It is recommended that whoever is assigned lead responsibility for developing cultural competency is also provided with a sound understanding of the protocol for the management of change within the agency.

In all agencies, there are “early adopters”, individuals who embrace a new idea earlier than some others and act as role models for their colleagues. However, these early adopters must have the support and positive sanction of their managers to take the risks and “get out in front” safely on sensitive issues such as cultural competency. If these risks are not reduced, these people are in danger of being marginalized by their colleagues, making them ineffectual and risking their jobs.

It is recommended that management clearly assign lead responsibility to one or more individuals, inform all staff and volunteers about the mandate given to them, and reiterate management commitment to cultural competency.

Recruitment of Staff, Board of Directors, and Volunteers

Perhaps the most important aspect of any agency is what kinds of persons actually comprise it. Sexual assault agencies look long and hard at individuals who seek to become part of them, whether Board members, management, staff, or volunteers. Depending on their role in the agency, these persons’ values, skills, experiences, stability, and personalities may have a powerful effect on their ability to fill their particular functions. A lack of “fit” between these personal attributes and the unique role and function of sexual assault agencies will pose a risk to these individuals, the agencies, and the clients.

There are some persons who build their professional careers on sexual assault prevention, intervention, and treatment. Based on formal educational achievement, they present themselves to sexual assault agencies as potential staff members. There are persons who are drawn to sexual assault programs to work out personal issues and will volunteer for a number of positions. There are still others who are exploring careers in human services and will also volunteer for school and career credit.

These forces act together to create, for many programs, a kind of closed, self-perpetuating system for the recruitment of new personnel. Career crisis intervention and treatment staff members within an agency will recruit among their friends and associates. Board members may look to their friends and associates to fill vacant Board positions. Agencies will look within their volunteer pool to fill open staff positions. Agencies may also have a large enough pool of applicants on file that they do not feel they have to recruit within the community for open positions.

The end result of these forces may be a pool of persons who are far more homogeneous than the community at large. The pool may be far more white, female, middleclass, college-educated, professional, institutional, and English-speaking than the community, making cultural and community knowledge, sensitivity, communications, and linkages very problematic. The resulting problem is less a matter of agency non-discrimination in employment (which is a serious matter for any business) but the agency inability to understand how to reach out to and serve the entire community.

People want, even need, to receive sensitive human services from persons who are like themselves in some way – language, race, ethnicity, class, education, experience, sexual orientation, disability, age, gender, and so on. A cultural gap often deters people from knowing about, seeking, or receiving needed services.

Altering recruitment to add more persons matching the community attributes is one way to reduce the cultural gap between the agency and its potential clients and their communities.

It is recommended that agencies alter their *recruitment* criteria and methods:

- establish positions targeted on increased cultural competence specific to one or more communities
- establish cultural criteria (e.g., language, skills, knowledge, ethnicity, experience, class, values, style) for specific positions becoming vacant
- tie these criteria to the specific management, intervention, prevention, education, or customer service goals
- substitute cultural knowledge for some portion of the educational requirement, as a substitution skill
- develop relationships with community persons, associations, and service agencies specifically for the purpose of recruitment
- recruit extensively through community-specific media

- leave considerable lead time to conduct a thorough recruitment, regardless of the number of existing applications on file
- if staff are often drawn from the volunteer pool, expand the recruitment and selection process which produces the volunteer pool
- build on any cultural variety within the organization to establish linkages to various communities of interest

It is recommended that agencies alter their *selection* methods:

- add community persons to the interview process
- include culture-specific questions to the interview
- test for culture-specific skills, such as language

It is recommended that agencies alter their *hiring* methods:

- ask for work conditions that actually allow for different kinds of employees or volunteers
- flex work times and other conditions appropriate for other cultures
- reimburse for special skills that are required for these positions

It is recommended that agencies alter their *support and retention* methods:

- develop culture-specific performance standards
- provide orientation, training, mentoring, and supervision for new employees
- provide opportunities for the safe expression of feelings based on cultural issues
- apply techniques to reduce stress and burnout
- analyze retention rates and reasons
- provide performance measures and reviews specific to cultural objectives