



The Community Tool Box

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Building Relationships with People from Different Cultures

Contributed by Marya Axner

Main Section

Edited by Bill Berkowitz

How do you learn people's cultures?

How do you build relationships with people from other cultures?

Relationships are powerful. Our one-to-one connections with each other are the foundation for change. And building relationships with people from different cultures, *often many different cultures*, is key in building diverse communities that are powerful enough to achieve significant goals.

Whether you want to make sure your children get a good education, bring quality health care into your communities, or promote economic development, there is a good chance you will need to work with people from several different racial, language, ethnic, or economic groups. And in order to work with people from different cultural groups effectively, you will need to build sturdy and caring relationships based on trust, understanding, and shared goals.

Why? Because trusting relationships are the glue that hold people together as they work on a common problem. (Also see [Chapter 14, Section 7: Building and Sustaining Relationships](#)). As people work on challenging problems, they will have to hang in there together when things get hard. They will have to support each other to stay with an effort, even when it feels discouraging. People will have to resist the efforts of those who use divide-and-conquer techniques--pitting one cultural group against another.

Whether you are Vietnamese, African American, Caucasian Protestant, Irish Catholic, Jewish, or from any other racial, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic group, you will probably need to establish relationships with people whose group you may know very little about.

Each one of us is like a hub of a wheel. Each one of us can build relationships and friendships around ourselves that provide us with the necessary strength to achieve community goals. If each person builds a network of diverse and strong relationships, we can come together and solve problems that we have in common.

In this section, we are going to talk about:

- Becoming aware of your own culture as a first step in learning about other people's culture.
- Building relationships with people from many different cultures.

But first let's talk about what culture is. (For a more thorough explanation, see [Chapter 27, Section 1: Understanding Culture and Diversity in Building Communities](#)). Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, "culture" refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, national origin, class, or religion. It can also include groups we join or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly we realize we all belong to many cultures at once. Do you agree? How might this apply to you?

How do you start learning about other people's cultures?

Start by becoming aware of your own culture.

It may seem odd that in order to learn about people in other cultures, we start by becoming more aware of our own culture. But

we believe this is true. Why?

If you haven't had a chance to understand how your culture has affected you first hand, it's more difficult to understand how it could affect anyone else or why it might be important to them. If you are comfortable talking about your own culture, then you will become better at listening to others talk about theirs. Or, if you understand how discrimination has affected you, then you may be more aware of how it has affected others.

Here are some tips on how to becoming more aware of your own culture:

What is your culture?

Do you have a culture? Do you have more than one? What is your cultural background?

Even if you don't know who your ancestors are, you have a culture. Even if you are a mix of many cultures, you have one. Culture evolves and changes all the time. It came from your ancestors from many generations ago, and it comes from your family and community today.

For example, if you are Irish American, your culture has probably influenced your life. You parents or grandparents almost certainly handed down values, customs, humor, and world views that played a role in shaping your growing-up environment and your life today. Perhaps your views towards family, work, health and disease, celebrations, and social issues are influenced by your Irish heritage or by the experiences your family had when they immigrated to the U.S.

In addition to the cultural groups we belong to, we also each have groups we identify with, such as being a parent, an athlete, an immigrant, a small business owner, or a wage worker. These kinds of groups, although not exactly the same as a culture, have similarities to cultural groups. For example, being a parent or and an immigrant may be an identity that influences how you view the world and how the world views you. Becoming aware of your different identities can help you understand what it might be like to belong to a cultural group.

Exercise:

Try listing all the cultures and identities you have: (This is just a list of suggestions to get you started. Add as many as you think describe you.)

What is your:	Are you:	Have you ever been:
Religion	A female	In the military
Nationality	A male	Poor
Race	Disabled	In prison
Sexual identity	From an urban area	Wealthy
Ethnicity	From a rural area	In the middle class
Occupation	A parent	In the working class
Marital status	A student	
Age		
Geographic region		

Did this help you think about your identities and cultures? How have these different cultures and identities affected your life? (See Tools for an extensive exercise on cultural identity.)

How do you build relationships with people from other cultures?

There are many ways that people can learn about other people's cultures and build relationships at the same time. Here are some steps you can take. They are first listed, and then elaborated upon one at a time.

1. Make a conscious decision to establish friendships with people from other cultures.
2. Put yourself in situations where you will meet people of other cultures.
3. Examine your biases about people from other cultures.
4. Ask people questions about their cultures, customs, and views.
5. Read about other people's culture's and histories
6. Listen to people tell their stories
7. Notice differences in communication styles and values; don't assume that the majority's way is the right way
8. Risk making mistakes
9. Learn to be an ally.

1. Make a conscious decision to establish friendships with people from other cultures

Making a decision is the first step. In order to build relationships with people different from yourself, you have to make a concerted effort to do so. There are societal forces that serve to separate us from each other. People from different economic groups, religions, ethnic groups, and races are often isolated from each other in schools, jobs, and neighborhoods. So, if we want things to be different, we need to take active steps to make them different.

You can join a sports team or club, become active in an organization, choose a job, or move to a neighborhood that puts you in contact with people of cultures different than your own. Also, you may want to take a few minutes to notice the diversity that is presently nearby. If you think about the people you see and interact with everyday, you may become more aware of the cultural differences that are around you.

Once you have made the decision to make friends with people different from yourself, you can go ahead and make friends with them in much the same way as with anyone else. You may need to take more time, and you may need to be more persistent. You may need to reach out and take the initiative more than you are used to. People who have been mistreated by society may take more time to trust you than people who haven't. Don't let people discourage you. There are good reasons why people have built up defenses, but it is not impossible to overcome them and make a connection. The effort is totally worth it.

2. Put yourself in situations where you will meet people of other cultures; especially if you haven't had the experience of being a minority, take the risk.

One of the first and most important steps is to show up in places where you will meet people of cultures other than your own. Go to meetings and celebrations of groups whose members you want to get to know. Or hang out in restaurants and other gathering places that different cultural groups go. You may feel embarrassed or shy at first, but your efforts will pay off. People of a cultural group will notice if you take the risk of coming to one of their events. If it is difficult for you to be the only person like yourself attending, you can bring a buddy with you and support each other in making friends.

3. Examine your biases about people from other cultures (For more, see Chapter 27, Section 5: Learning to be an Ally for People from Diverse Groups and Backgrounds)

We all carry misinformation and stereotypes about people in different cultures. Especially, when we are young, we acquire this information in bits and pieces from TV, from listening to people talk, and from the culture at large. We are not bad people because we acquired this; no one requested to be misinformed. But in order to build relationships with people of different cultures, we have to become aware of the misinformation we acquired.

An excellent way to become aware of your own stereotypes is to pick groups that you generalize about and write down your opinions. Once you have, examine the thoughts that came to your mind and where you acquired them. (For an exercise in identifying stereotypes, go to Tools.)

Another way to become aware of stereotypes is to talk about them with people who have similar cultures to your own. In such settings you can talk about the misinformation you acquired without being offensive to people from a particular group. You can get together with a friend or two and talk about how you acquired stereotypes or fears of other different people. You can answer these kinds of questions:

- How did your parents feel about different ethnic, racial, or religious groups?
- What did your parents communicate to you with their actions and words?
- Were your parents friends with people from many different groups?
- What did you learn in school about a particular group?
- Was there a lack of information about some people?
- Are there some people you shy away from? Why?

4. Ask people questions about their cultures, customs, and views

People, for the most part, want to be asked questions about their lives and their cultures. Many of us were told that asking questions was nosy; but if we are thoughtful, asking questions can help you learn about people of different cultures and help build relationships. People are usually pleasantly surprised when others show interest in their cultures. If you are sincere and you can listen, people will tell you a lot.

For example, you might ask a person of African heritage if they want to be called, Black or African-American. Or you can ask a Jewish person what it is like for them at Christmas time when practically every store, TV commercial, and radio station focuses almost entirely on Christmas.

5. Read about other people's cultures and histories

It helps to read about and learn about people's cultures and histories. If you know something about the reality of someone's life and history, it shows that you care enough to take the time to find out about it. It also gives you

background information that will make it easier to ask questions that make sense.

However, you don't have to be an expert on someone's culture to get to know them or to ask questions. People who are, themselves, from a culture are usually the best experts, anyway.

6. Don't forget to care and show caring

It is easy to forget that the basis of any relationship is caring. Everyone wants to care and be cared about. Caring about people is what makes a relationship real. Don't let your awkwardness around cultural differences get in the way of caring about people.

7. Listen to people tell their stories

If you get an opportunity to hear someone tell you her life story first hand, you can learn a lot--and build a strong relationship at the same time. *Every* person has an important story to tell. Each person's story tells something about their culture.

Listening to people's stories, we can get a fuller picture of what people's lives are like--their feelings, their nuances, and the richness of their lives. Listening to people also helps us get through our numbness-- there is a real person before us, not someone who is reduced to stereotypes in the media.

Additionally, listening to members of groups that have been discriminated against can give us a better understanding of what that experience is like. Listening gives us a picture of discrimination that is more real than what we can get from reading an article or listening to the radio.

Exercise:

You can informally ask people in your neighborhood or organization to tell you a part of their life stories as a member of a particular group. You can also incorporate this activity into a workshop or retreat for your group or organization. Have people each take five or ten minutes to talk about one piece of their life stories. If the group is large, you will probably have to divide into small groups, so everyone gets a chance to speak.

8. Notice differences in communication styles and values; don't assume that the majority's way is the right way.

We all have a tendency to assume that the way that most people do things is the acceptable, normal, or right way. As community workers, we need to learn about cultural differences in values and communication styles, and not assume that the majority way is the right way to think or behave.

Example:

You are in a group discussion. Some group members don't speak up, while others dominate, filling all the silences. The more vocal members of the group become exasperated that others don't talk. It also seems that the more vocal people are those that are members of the more mainstream culture, while those who are less vocal are from minority cultures.

How do we understand this? How can this be resolved?

In some cultures, people feel uncomfortable with silence, so they speak to fill the silences. In other cultures, it is customary to wait for a period of silence before speaking. If there aren't any silences, people from those cultures may not ever speak. Also, members of some groups (women, people of low income, some racial and ethnic minorities, and others) don't speak up because they have received messages from society at large that their contribution is not as important as others; they have gotten into the habit of deferring their thinking to the thinking of others.

When some people don't share their thinking, we all lose out. We all need the opinions and voices of those people who have traditionally been discouraged from contributing.

In situations like the one described above, becoming impatient with people for not speaking is usually counter-productive. However, you can structure a meeting to encourage the quieter people to speak. For example, you can:

- Have people break into pairs before discussing a topic in the larger group.
- At certain times have each person in the circle make a comment. (People can pass if they want to.)
- Follow a guideline that everyone speaks once, before anyone speaks twice.
- Invite the quieter people to lead part of the meeting.
- Talk about the problem openly in a meeting, and invite the more vocal people to try to speak less often.

- Between meetings, ask the quieter people what would help them speak, or ask them for their ideas on how a meeting should be run.

A high school basketball team has to practice and play on many afternoons and evenings. One team member is a recent immigrant, whose family requires her to attend the birthday parties of all the relatives in her extended family. The coach is angry with the parents for this requirement, because it takes his player away from the team.

How do we understand this? How can this be resolved?

Families have different values, especially when it comes to family closeness, loyalty, and responsibility. In many immigrant and ethnic families, young people are required to put their family's needs first, before the requirements of extra-curricular activities. Young people from immigrant families who grow up in the U.S. often feel torn between the majority culture and the culture of their families; they feel pressure from each cultures to live according to its values, and they feel they have to choose between the two.

As community workers, we need to support and respect minority and immigrant families and their values. It may already be a huge concession on the part of a family to allow a teenager to participate in extracurricular activities at all. We need to make allowances for the cultural differences and try to help young people feel that they can have both worlds--instead of having to reject one set of values for another.

As community builders, it helps to develop relationships with parents. If a young person sees her parents have relationships with people from the mainstream culture, it can help her feel that their family is accepted. It supports the teen in being more connected to her family and her community--and also, both relationships are critical protective factors for drug and alcohol abuse and other dangerous behaviors. In addition, in building relationships with parents, we develop lines of communication, so when conflicts arise, they can be more easily resolved.

9. Risk making mistakes

As you are building relationships with people who have different cultural backgrounds than your own, you will probably make mistakes at some point. That happens. Don't let making mistakes of making mistakes keep you from going ahead and building relationships.

If you say or do something that is insensitive, you can learn something from it. Ask the affected person what you bothered or offended them, apologize, and then go on in building the relationship. Don't let guilt bog you down.

10. Learn to be an ally (See Chapter 27, Section 5: *Learning to be an Ally for People from Diverse Groups and Backgrounds*)

One of the best ways to help you build relationships with people of different cultures is to demonstrate that you are willing to take a stand against discrimination when it occurs. People will be much more motivated to get to know you if they see that you are willing to take risks on their behalf.

We also have to educate ourselves and keep informed so that we understand the issues that each group faces and we become involved in their struggles--instead of sitting on the sidelines and watching from a distance.

In Summary

Friendship is powerful. It is our connection to each other that gives meaning to our lives. Our caring for each other is often what motivates us to make change. And establishing connections with people from diverse backgrounds can be key in making significant changes in our communities.

As individuals, and in groups, *we can* change our communities. We can set up neighborhoods and institutions in which people commit themselves to working to form strong relationships and alliances with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. We can establish networks and coalitions in which people are knowledgeable about each other's struggles, and are willing to lend a hand. Together, we can do it.

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Resources

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Internet Resources

The National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University increases the capacity of health care and mental health programs to design, implement and evaluate culturally and linguistically competent service delivery systems. Publications and web links available.

Culture Matters is a cross-cultural training workbook developed by the Peace Corps to help new volunteers acquire the knowledge and skills to work successfully and respectfully in other cultures.

The Multicultural Pavilion offers resources and dialogue for educators, students and activists on all aspects of multicultural education.

The International & Cross-Cultural Evaluation Topical Interest Group, an organization that is affiliated with the American Evaluation Association, provides evaluators who are interested in cross-cultural issues with opportunities for professional development.

The Center for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services collects and describes early childhood/early intervention resources and serves as point of exchange for users.

SIL International makes available "The Stranger's Eyes," an article that speaks to cultural sensitivity with questions that can be strong tools for discussion.

Organizations

Center for Living Democracy
289 Fox Farm Rd
PO Box 8187
Brattleboro, VT 05304-8187
(802) 254-1234

National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI)
1835 K Street, N.W., Suite 715
Washington, D.C. 20006
(202) 785-9400

Re-evaluation Counseling
719 Second Avenue North
Seattle, WA 98109
(206) 284-0113

Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Ave.
Montgomery, AL 36104

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