



Addressing Cultural Conflicts in Multicultural Coalitions

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In the Twin Cities metro area of Minnesota, Family & Children's Service (FCS) has been building multicultural coalitions to address civic issues for almost 20 years¹. During that time, we have experienced conflicts that can be defined as cultural conflicts (and we still do!). Cultural conflicts are inevitable in civic engagement initiatives. The real question is whether organizations are prepared to address and learn from them in ways that strengthen their civic engagement efforts, rather than undermine them.

I'll start with a word about the nature of such cultural conflicts. Sometimes, conflicts will arise between an organization and some of its constituents, due to different values or interests, preferences over how to address issues (i.e., strategy), mistrust, or different ways of seeing the world. At other times, the conflicts may arise directly between constituent groups. In any of these cases, the best strategies will usually be the preventive ones, although conflicts can also come to a head in unpredictable ways. In all cases, responses require personal and organizational self-awareness, intentionality, and flexibility.

The following are ten strategies to consider when planning for the inevitable cultural conflicts that will arise in civic engagement initiatives. Everything I am sharing here is *one* perspective about such conflicts, from a senior organizational leader who is White, Irish American, and a gay male. What I have learned personally, after years of undoing racism and cultural competency trainings, is that I still frequently view things through my own cultural (and power) lens. So please take these strategies as items to consider - but only in the context of your own experience, community, and organization.

- 1.) Listen to Many Voices.** A friend of mine from Ecuador used to say that "The Truth is no one's patrimony." What he meant by that is that the truth of a situation isn't owned by one particular group in society. ***But leaders in organizations seeking to do multicultural work (either direct services or civic engagement) need to keep in mind that "reality"***

¹ **Mobilizing and Organizing for Victory and Empowerment (M.O.V.E.)** is one example of the multicultural coalitions that FCS has helped to build over the years. M.O.V.E. builds leadership and power around issues of racial and economic justice, uniting communities to achieve social change. Members, including youth and adults, join together on action committees to change community conditions and push for systems changes that enhance the well-being of families. For more information on M.O.V.E. and for other examples of FCS' work in the community visit <http://www.everyfamilymatters.org>.

at the top of an organization tends to be self-reinforcing. The literature on organizational adaptability also points out that there tends to be less diversity of mental models at the top of a hierarchical organization than at the base. Whether or not one uses terms such as unintentional racism or ethnocentrism to describe this phenomenon organizational culture and decision-making will tend to reflect the dominant culture(s) that have led the organization in recent years – and/or for decades. The risk is that such conformity of viewpoints makes it difficult to see what community members are seeing and dealing with on a daily basis. This is one reason that many organizations in recent years have begun to host “community listening posts” or forums in which organizational leaders can listen, interact, and learn directly from **multiple** community members (not just gatekeepers or key informants) whose life experience has been different from their own.

- 2.) **The Inside *is* the Outside.** It is even more important for you to address the multicultural conflicts and racism issues **inside** the organization, even as you attempt to engage communities in addressing similar issues outside the organization. Organizations can only provide effective and credible civic leadership when they “walk the talk” internally as well as externally. For over 15 years, FCS has had one or another incarnation of an internal Undoing Racism Committee, engaging the organization’s leadership and staff on these issues. These efforts can lead to dissatisfaction, cultural conflict, frustration, and hard feelings. Such efforts consequently have periods of expansion and contraction. But commitment to engage leadership and staff on these issues also produces hope, and increases the organization’s credibility in the community – especially when the organization is making a long-term investment in addressing these issues internally. No less importantly, they provide staff with opportunities to build skill in navigating cultural conflicts -- skills which staff can take with them into their efforts in the community.
- 3.) **Engage Organizational Leaders.** As in any organizational change effort, undoing racism efforts and cultural competency skills building can only be successful when they have direct endorsement from the organization’s top leader, as well as the ongoing involvement of senior management. All staff need to understand that the leadership believes that undoing racism and dealing with cultural conflicts are part of what the organization needs to do to carry out its mission. This doesn’t necessarily mean that leadership should make all these training and engagement efforts mandatory for all staff, although that may be the path of least resistance in some organizations. It does mean that organizational leaders need to participate in these efforts, and be intentional about how to engage with and support them.
- 4.) **Hire for Civic Engagement Skills!** By all means, hire a civic engagement team that has linguistic and cultural diversity. But just as importantly, you need to hire candidates with real world experience in civic engagement, and real world experience with negotiating cultural differences and conflicts. Sometimes organizations that are relatively new to community work make the mistake of focusing hiring decisions on an individual’s cultural identity and linguistic skills, and pay inadequate attention to considering whether candidates have practical experience with civic engagement and cross-cultural work. This can create very difficult and often negative experiences for both new hires and for the community you are seeking to engage. Behavioral interviewing techniques, including questions such as “Tell me about a time when you had to enter and work within a community where people recognized

that you were an outsider” or “Tell me about a time when you experienced a cultural conflict. What was the conflict and what steps did you take to resolve it?” can help to draw out strengths in the candidate that go beyond identity and can lead to more successful hires.

- 5.) **Build a Power Analysis.** Does your civic engagement initiative have an analysis of racial and economic inequities in the U.S.? In your community? Is such an analysis “shared” with community members by your organization, or do you use the intelligence of the group to **build it together**? The former may be expedient, but is likely to leave out important concerns for particular constituent groups, setting the stage for future cultural conflicts.
- 6.) **Make the Rules Fair – And Clear.** A Salvadoran organizer I knew used to say: “People need to know what to expect” when we are inviting them to participate in public actions. He felt this way because as an immigrant and political refugee, he was very aware that the people we organize have been burned many times by unforeseen circumstances and hidden rules that have caused them serious hardships – even threatening their own lives or those of loved ones. We don’t need to reproduce those experiences in our civic engagement efforts. Coalition structure, rules, and norms matter because they are how democracy and fairness are enacted on a daily basis in civic engagement initiatives. Are your efforts organized by neighborhood or community, cultural group, issue, or some mix of the above? Is it clear how decisions are made in your civic engagement initiative? Is it clear how community members can take on formal leadership roles? Did participants arrive at these rules and norms together?
- 7.) **Expect Values Conflicts.** Effective multicultural work recognizes that constituent groups can get into conflicts with each other about very deep-seated cultural values. Issues that our coalitions have had to deal with include:
 - How to address domestic violence and child abuse/neglect in immigrant communities. The issues and concerns are numerous, and include:
 - i. Family and community leadership -- who gets to make decisions in the family and community: men, women, or both?
 - ii. Misrepresentations of traditional gender roles in the media, and by U.S.-born staff in the helping professions and systems such as the police, courts, and child welfare
 - iii. The perceived instability of traditional gender roles after immigration to the U.S.
 - iv. Which oral and written words should be used to communicate about domestic violence and child abuse/neglect concepts in the native language of an immigrant community (a particularly thorny issue for immigrant communities with limited literacy
 - Whether to focus on the negatives of domestic violence in the African American community (i.e., shock people from awareness into action, and demand men’s accountability for stopping violence and producing change) or emphasize the

community's positive cultural assets and resources around family life that can help prevent domestic violence (emphasize the positive things that men are already doing as fathers, and encourage men to do more); and

- The question of whether a group of GLBTQ youth could join a pre-existing multicultural, multi-issue coalition in which members of one immigrant group in the coalition felt that expression of GLBTQ identities runs counter to their values.

8.) Build the Civic Table. In each of the above cases, we saw our role as one of facilitating discussion and grassroots decision-making among community groups that had different cultural experiences and interests. The resolution of cultural conflicts came from the group process – not from staff making decisions for constituents about how to resolve conflicts. What staff had to share was our organization's mission and values. Some issues were tough for staff, who of course had their own opinions about how these conflicts should be resolved. Managers' role with staff was to be clear that a staff organizer's role was to **bring people to the table** to talk and make decisions together. Staff's role was not to advocate for a particular outcome, although they could remind community members of our organization's mission and values, and of the rules that community members had developed to guide their decision-making.

9.) Respect Language Needs. If more than one language is spoken among your constituents, you will need to hire staff who speak the languages. But you will also need to develop a range of strategies to increase interpretation and translation capacity in your civic engagement efforts. Technology can facilitate cross cultural communication, increase trust, and create a more level playing field among groups that speak different languages. Simultaneous interpretation equipment can be purchased for \$2,000-3,000. We purchased sets of the equipment in increments, and were fortunate to find funders who wanted to pay for the equipment. It will also be important to identify roles in relation to interpretation and translation of materials. Do staff provide translation at meetings? Do they get breaks? Do you pay a stipend to constituents to interpret? Are meeting agendas and coalition documents available in all the languages that constituents speak?

10.) Differentiate your Message from Branding. Melanie Klein's provocative book *No Logo* underscores the negative impact of excessive branding on our lives, communities, and political culture. Yet, current business and management experts emphasize the importance of focus and branding for non-profit organizations. Most large non-profits these days have someone whose job it is to manage the brand in the form of communications and marketing. Communities operate differently. We have learned from our multicultural and culturally-specific engagement efforts that sometimes we need to loosen control over branding. This helps constituents communicate about values, issues, and action ideas in ways that are in tune with a community's cultural experience, values, and aesthetic sensibilities. Developing the right outreach tools and messages requires ongoing engagement by community members. It also requires more internal communication and negotiation. The payoff is that community members will feel like they own the messages and will help disseminate them more broadly in the community.