



Strengthening Cultural Competency

Description:

This tool provides explanations of cultural competency, describes the stages of cultural competency, and provides examples of how to help organizations become more culturally competent.

How it can be used:

As a health organization, you will need to interact with non-Indigenous organizations as you support coordinated care for your clients. As part of building relationships with those organization, it may be necessary to help them strengthen their cultural competency. Use the following steps and suggestions to help guide your efforts in working with non-Indigenous organizations.

In considering cultural competency, it's good to begin with definitions.

Culture represents “patterns of being” for a group of people and how those patterns are expressed. Culture shapes individuals’ experiences, perceptions, decisions, and how they interact with others. It’s essentially how groups of people believe, think, and act. From the Indigenous worldview, culture is the expression, the life-ways, and the spiritual, psychological, social, and material practices.

Competence describes the ability to do the right thing successfully; implying that the person or organization has both the skills (do the right thing) and the ability (do it successfully). Competencies refer to the knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, and attitudes that underpin the competence.

Pulling it together then, **Cultural Competence** means to know and behave in a way that respects and honours the beliefs of others. Essentially, it means how you act based on what you know and what you believe.

Strengthening cultural competency usually requires some degree of change. As individuals change, then organizations can change. It’s helpful to understand the stages that a person goes through when adapting to change as well as the types of organizational supports that would encourage cultural competency.

The stages a person goes through include:

1. Contact – having a first exposure to an idea, concept or experience.
2. Consider – exploring what it would mean.
3. Comprehend – understanding the implications.
4. Commit – integrating changes.

Because employees are at different stages, organizations need to offer a range of activities that promote and support cultural competency wherever their employees are at on their journey.

The following section will describe each stage and what the individual may be feeling or exhibiting and include specific actions that an organization can do to help support individuals to move toward culturally competency and a more respectful working environment.





Contact

During this stage, individuals may be completely unaware of Indigenous cultures, may not understand their own biases, may be curious, or may jump to conclusions based on earlier experiences.

What an organization can do for someone in this stage:

- Communicate clearly about what is needed to improve cultural competency in the organization;
- Explain the reasons and why it's necessary for the organization;
- Show how everyone will benefit because cultural competency is being improved;
- Be cognizant that there may be some unconscious prejudices in some employees, not because they are malicious but because of unrecognized societal biases;
- Approach issues with clarity and without judgement;
- Provide varied opportunities for individuals to learn about Indigenous cultures.

Consider

During this stage, individuals are reviewing the information and, depending on their mindset, may be very open to learning more about Indigenous cultures or may find that their previous assumptions about Indigenous culture and the new expectations of cultural competency are in conflict.

What an organization can do for someone in this stage:

- Allow safe forums for individuals to ask questions and get answers;
- Support opportunities for introspection and gentle challenges to formerly-held beliefs;
- Provide examples of other organizations that provide culturally competent services;
- Identify attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable people to work cross-culturally;
- Ensure leadership models culturally competent behaviours;
- Share timelines and expectations so everyone knows what to expect;

Provide information several times and in different ways as individuals have different learning styles and may not retain it all the first time.

Comprehend

During this stage, individuals are internalizing new concepts and seeing how they can be applied in their work and their lives. They understand the value, the intent, and the benefits. For many, this is an “aha!” moment, when they are able to move past previous beliefs and begin to change their mindset and their actions.

What an organization can do for someone in this stage:

- Clarify the desired behaviours when required;
- Recognize “quick wins” and small improvements;
- Have “open door” policies and visible supportive leadership;
- Ensure leadership models the behaviours expected of the staff;
- Be consistent in how the policies and practices and expectations are applied;
- Have culturally competent staff mentor others;





- Offer a variety of training opportunities, such as lunch and learn sessions, cultural sensitivity training, visits to Indigenous communities, learning from Elders, etc.;
- Provide extra supports for those that are skeptical or resistant, to help address issues;
- Get staff involved in planning activities;
- Share the successes and communicate often.

Commit

During this stage, individuals are demonstrating that they are culturally competent; they interact with respect, are non-judgemental, and seek opportunities to engage with and learn more about Indigenous peoples and cultures.

What an organization can do for someone in this stage:

- Ensure employees are feeling comfortable, be alert to any concerns that can be addressed;
- Reinforce the culturally competent behaviours;
- Communicate often about the improvements and the successes;
- Monitor progress and communicate any issues to leadership;
- Communicate the resolution of issues to underscore the leadership commitment to become a culturally competent organization;
- Reward and celebrate the successes;
- Continue to hold individuals accountable, link individual behaviour to the success of the organization's efforts;
- Engage the employees in planning on how the organization can do better.

Some considerations:

- The stages can pertain to all levels in the organization – governance/leadership, management, and employees.
- At any given time, an organization will have individuals at all of the stages, so ensure activities are provided for each stage.
- Ensure activities are in place to help individuals as they move through each stage. (i.e., don't leave someone in the "consider" stage without providing support to move to "comprehending".)
- Always ensure a welcoming and non-judgemental environment to help individuals as they progress.

