

## **What Is Cultural Competence?**

Joel Moreno, LMFT and Trainer for Kern County Mental Health, recently shared his thoughts on cultural competence with the Alternative Dispute Resolution section of the Bar at their monthly meeting. He began by sharing a quote by Steven Covey; “The deepest hunger of the body is air. The deepest human need is the need to be understood.” He encouraged the mediators in the audience to understand the importance of that need and to continuously work on improving their own cultural competence since it is a lifelong process.

Cultural competency includes the acceptance and respect for differences; a continuous self-assessment regarding culture; an attention to the dynamics of difference and the resources and flexibility within service models to meet the needs of minority populations. There are many reasons why cultural competence is important in delivering legal services. America’s population growth and changing demographics has forced us to acknowledge our diversity. New approaches are needed in service delivery to address these cultural differences among consumers. Developing culturally sensitive practices helps reduce barriers to effective utilization of your services. It is important to form professional relationships across cultures. In essence, it improves the overall quality of the services you provide.

Moreno explained that the dynamic of difference occurs when two people from different cultures interact and misjudge each other’s actions based on their own learned expectations. Both will bring culturally prescribed patterns of communication etiquette and problem solving skills to a situation. Historic distrust of authority figures is an example of this dynamic. Without the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics, misinterpretations and misjudgments can occur.

The professional skills that can be enhanced to improve cultural competence include the ability to openly discuss racial and ethnic differences to the point where you understand how individual clients view their ethnicity or race and the role of language in their culture and are able to advocate for them and use resources on their behalf appropriately. It is important to help

combat racism, racial stereotypes and myths and utilize the concepts of empowerment when working with clients. The ability to evaluate new techniques, research, and knowledge as to their validity and applicability in working with people of color are valuable skills.

Personal qualities that reflect genuineness, empathy, non-possessiveness, acceptance, warmth and flexibility are helpful when trying to welcome diverse clients. It takes more than a willingness to work with clients of different ethnic backgrounds, but also the openness about one's own personal values, stereotypes, and biases about his/her own and others' ethnicity and social class to encourage open dialog and rapport.

Moreno says the best way to maximize talent is to mix differences, explaining that we each bring something of value to the table. He defined the cultural competence continuum as a long term process of personal development as we learn more about others and our responses to them beginning with cultural destructiveness and moving toward cultural proficiency. The characteristics of each stage on the continuum are listed below:

### **Cultural Destructiveness**

When ideas, thoughts, attitudes, behaviors and policies are destructive to cultures and the individuals within the culture

### **Cultural Incapacity**

Lack of capacity or will to help minority clients

Extremely biased and believes in the racial superiority of one group

Supports racist policies and stereotypes

### **Cultural Blindness**

All people are the same regardless of ethnicity and culture

Ignores cultural strengths, believes in and encourages assimilation

### **Cultural Pre-Competence**

Desires quality service for all people

Committed to civil rights

Runs the risk of developing a false sense of accomplishment

### **Basic Cultural Competence**

Accepts and respects cultural differences

Committed to promoting cultural knowledge, self evaluation and acknowledgment of the dynamics of difference

Adapts services to fit the cultural population you serve

### **Cultural Proficiency**

Holds culture in high esteem

Actively seeks to add to the knowledge of culturally competent practices by continually advocating for cultural competence

So how do we do this? What steps can we take? Here are some suggestions.

- Value diversity and view it as a strength
- Learn about the specific culture of your client
- Tentatively apply general guidelines with an openness to change and challenge
- Collaborate with a cultural broker/informant who can answer your questions
- Shift your intervention style to meet cultural needs of clients
- Be attuned to social rhythms (starts, stops, interruptions, involvement)
- Be aware of nonverbal communication such as:

Proxemics – personal space

Kinesics – body movements, facial expressions, eye contact, touch

Paralanguage – loudness, silences, rate

High context (nonverbal) vs. low context (content)

- Be overt by stating openness, awareness of limitations and intention
- Ask for feedback on verbal and nonverbal messages such as:

*I'm here to help out. I want to understand you and your experience. I know we have cultural differences...*

*Please let me know if I say or do something that makes you uncomfortable.*

- Recognize societal forces of discrimination & advocate as needed

We should all ask ourselves where we are on the cultural competence continuum. Does it differ by race or ethnicity? Do you have a cultural broker who helps you understand the perspective of others? If not, do you know someone you could ask to help with this important personal development process? How do you feel when others make wrong assumptions about you or someone who is important to you? Start with that feeling for motivation to work on cultural competence.

Submitted by: Dr. Laurelyn Irving, Executive Director for Mediation Affiliates and Dr. Joel Moreno, Unit Supervisor and Trainer for Kern County Department of Mental Health.