



YOUTH
OUTSIDE

GUIDE TO CULTURAL RELEVANCY

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the outdoor field agrees that there is an urgent need for structural and institutional change in order to engage and retain a more diverse population of participants and staff. Youth Outside defines **cultural relevancy** as “effectively reaching and engaging communities and their youth in a manner that is consistent with the cultural context and values of that community; while effectively addressing the disparities of diversity and inclusion within an organization’s entire structure.”

The challenges facing the cultural relevancy movement within the outdoor field are numerous, and the solutions, while easy to state, are not always easy to achieve. Becoming more culturally relevant as an organization begins with a commitment from the individuals within that organization to remain mindful of oneself and others, to be willing to challenge institutionalized norms that maintain the status quo, and to work daily to create a respectful and inclusive environment for all.

The following *Guide to Cultural Relevancy* merely scratches the surface of a highly complex issue, and Youth Outside hopes that it serves as a starting point for analyzing cultural relevancy within your organization. This guide presents three major areas of an organization that should be viewed through the critical lens of cultural relevancy:

1. Organizational Culture
2. Staff Development
3. Program Delivery



1. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

An organization's culture is comprised of many things, primary among those are shared values, practices, and the behaviors of an organization. Following are some key areas to evaluate as an organization seeks to become more culturally relevant.



Five essential elements contribute to a system's, institution's, or agency's ability to become more culturally competent which include:

1. Valuing diversity
2. Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment
3. Being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact
4. Having institutionalized culture knowledge
5. Having developed adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity

These five elements should be manifested at every level of an organization including policy making, administration, and practice. Further, these elements should be reflected in the attitudes, structures, policies, and services of the organization. *(National Center for Cultural Competence, Cross, et al)*

Related Words

There are several related words or phrases commonly used when discussing cultural relevancy, often times used interchangeably. Recognizing that these phrases hold separate meanings is as critical as understanding that they are interconnected. The list provided below offers some examples of such words and their definitions, and we encourage you to consider their distinctions as they are incorporated into the following pages.



Diversity

Diversity: Psychological, physical, and social differences that occur among any and all individuals, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, and learning styles. A diverse group, community, or organization is one in which a variety of social and cultural characteristics exist. (*The National Multicultural Institute*)



Inclusion

Inclusion: The act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces differences and offers respect in words and actions for all people. (*UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity*)



Equity

Equity: The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of certain groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups. (*UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity*)



Cultural Competency

Cultural Competency: A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. **Culture** implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group. **Competence** implies having the capacity to function effectively.

2. STAFF DEVELOPMENT

2.1 STRATEGIES FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT HIRING PRACTICES

- Recruitment Strategies
 - Review and revise job descriptions, eliminating requirements that do not accurately reflect the qualifications needed for the work.

FOR EXAMPLE

- ❖ *Does community engagement or outreach really require a Bachelor's Degree?*
- ❖ *Does summer camp coordinator really require 5 years of previous experience working with youth AND a teaching credential?*

Distinguishing between a preference and a true requirement can help increase access to your job posting to a more diverse population of applicants.

- Incorporate interview questions regarding cultural relevancy.
- Recruit for qualified individuals that represent the community being served.
 - This may require that recruitment efforts go beyond traditional job boards or word of mouth.

2.2 STRATEGIES FOR STAFF RETENTION

- Avoid tokenizing staff. Do not ask one staff person to speak on behalf of an entire community.

FOR EXAMPLE

Asking a Latino staff person what the Latino community prefers (regarding anything)

Asking an LGBTQIA staff person what the LGBTQIA community prefers (regarding anything)

- ❖ *This tokenizing behavior inappropriately places the responsibility on one person to speak for an extremely large and diverse community, without recognizing that the differences are so vast it's impossible to know what an entire community prefers.*

- Create and enforce a system of accountability or a grievance procedure that allows staff to share their concerns without feeling stigmatized as “problematic” for raising their concerns or without being disregarded.

FOR EXAMPLE

A staff person complains to a manager or to HR about the way they were spoken to by a peer or a superior. The HR person or manager replies: “Oh, I’m sure he/she did not mean to make you feel bad; are you sure you’re not overreacting?” and ends the conversation.

- Establish a No-Tolerance culture that discourages inappropriate jokes targeting any specific demographic by
 - Posting your organization’s values of respect, inclusion, safety, diversity throughout your office;
 - Intentionally and regularly celebrating and appreciating differences; and
 - Respectfully and consistently interrupting toxic behavior that stereotypes, excludes, or shames individuals.

2.3 STRATEGIES FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL

- **Inclusivity:** With participation from all staff, create a list of words or phrases that are more inclusive and/or safe to use in place of others. Collectively commit to mindfully honoring this list.

FOR EXAMPLE

“You all” vs “you guys” is more inclusive of all gender identities.

- **Accountability:** Create a system or feedback loop for employees to address micro and macro aggressions in the workplace
- **Difficult Conversations:** Bring the organization together to discuss real time issues and news events that dis-proportionately affect low-income and communities of color. Provide support and tools for staff to feel empowered to have difficult conversations such as effective communication training and third party mediated conversations.

3. PROGRAM DELIVERY

3.1 STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM DELIVERY

- Deliver programs in English and/or in the dominant language of the majority of participants (if other than English).
 - If your organization does not have staff who speak the language, partner with organizations that do have staff that are representative of the community being served.
- Teach participants basic facilitation skills and empower them to guide parts of the program.
- Evaluate participants on their experience of the program delivery to assess whether they felt it related to them and their everyday life.
- Modify program delivery as informed by the feedback given by the community being served.

3.2 STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM/PROGRAMS

- **Effective Engagement**
 - Get to know your participants by being curious about their interests, hobbies, and their opinions, free of judgement.
 - Create space for your participants to teach you or share about the issues that concern them or are important to them.
 - Integrate the needs and interests of the community you are serving into your organization's curriculum and activities.
 - As instructors or facilitators, be willing to learn from the youth or participants, and acknowledge when they are teaching you something new.

- Consider the following critical questions when developing culturally relevant programs.

1. *What does cultural relevancy refer to in regards to the community my organization is serving?*
2. *How are other people within my organization using the phrase Cultural Relevance?*
3. *Who is informing our organizational plans/decisions?*
4. *What are the realities and histories of the group(s) receiving services?*
5. *What specific actions can/will we take to better understand the needs of the community being served?*
6. *What are the existing/current barriers to participation?*
7. *Can we admit if we don't have the capacity to be culturally relevant at the moment and seek support from those that do?*
8. *Are we incorporating leaders from the communities being served into our organization?*
9. *What is the best way to elicit feedback from participants and other stakeholders?*
10. *What process will we use to ensure cultural relevancy is being evaluated on a regular basis?*

- Evaluation: Collect feedback from participants, staff, and other stakeholders (i.e. parents) to assess the cultural relevancy within your organization and its programs by
 - Surveying the participants to learn if they
 - Felt connected with the program or curriculum;
 - Felt that the program staff validated their lived experience; and
 - Felt safe to share authentically throughout the experience.
 - Survey the staff to learn if they
 - Feel safe to be honest about issues that concern them;
 - Feel that their differences are appreciated within the organizational culture;
 - Feel supported by their peers and supervisors ; and
 - Feel that the organization is making an authentic attempt to increase their level of cultural relevancy.
 - Incorporate feedback received into your organization's ongoing planning and efforts to be more culturally relevant.

CONCLUSION

This guide is meant to support you in diving into a complex issue by focusing on key areas of an organization and the key questions we must all consider on an ongoing basis. The work of becoming more culturally relevant is both an individual endeavor and a collective commitment to find ways of being more inclusive, more representative of the diversity of our social fabric, and more committed to offering programs that are informed by the voice of the community being served. Only through authentic and increased cultural relevancy will the outdoor field succeed in engaging with and retaining more diverse populations at the staffing and participant levels.

ADDITIONAL LINKS AND RESOURCES

For additional information on Cultural Relevancy and training opportunities, visit the Youth Outside website at www.youthoutside.org.

Read the Green 2.0 Report at www.diversegreen.org/report.