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The Culturally Competent Organization

Kumea Shorter-Gooden

ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, organizations need to actively work to foster diversity. This is important because it is the just response to an uneven playing field, because the rapidly changing demographics in the United States demand that institutions be responsive if they are to survive, and because heterogeneous groups are more effective than homogeneous groups. Culturally competent organizations—whether they are schools, colleges, or libraries—have three elements in common: (1) they foster the access and success of diverse students, consumers, and employees, (2) they promote a positive, welcoming, and affirming climate for all, and (3) they infuse diverse perspectives throughout the substantive work of the organization, for example, in the educational curricula and library programming.

In 1948, my mother graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from Howard University, and she began working in catalog maintenance at the Library of Congress. She was interested in literature, hoped to write a great American novel, and thought the Library of Congress would be a great place to nurture that dream. But three years later, she quit because of the blatant racism. As a black woman, her job required a bachelor's degree, but she was working side-by-side with white women who held the very same position with only a high school diploma, some of whom were rather incompetent.

A few years later, I was born, and our family resided in a very racially segregated Washington, DC. We lived two blocks from Hyattsville, MD. The DC side was probably 98 percent black, and the Maryland side was likely 95 percent white. Eastern Avenue not only divided DC and Maryland; it was a line of racial demarcation. I know we still have our dividing lines; they haven't been erased altogether. But they are much more porous; there is much more fluidity, and the edges of them have frayed.

The world is changing! Forty-three percent of the residents of the State of Maryland are black, Latino, or Asian, and within a decade or so, the state will be majority "minority." Many residents are immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants. And we have diversity in socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and gender identity and expression.

Plus we are living in a time when we are more aware of the fact that all of us have multiple identities. None of us is just one thing. Some people are biracial or multiracial. For many, identity shifts and changes over time. People don't fit in easy boxes. They don't necessarily want to check just one.

Diversity is the order of the day. And yet it's not enough to simply watch it from a distance or even to simply celebrate diversity. Instead we need to actively foster diversity.

Fostering diversity is important for three key reasons:

1. First, we do it because it is the right thing to do. We want everyone to be on a level playing field—to have an equal opportunity to learn, to be educated, to get a job, to thrive. This is the *social justice* rationale.
2. Second, because of the rapidly changing demographics, we must embrace diversity. The businesses and schools that fail to figure out how to engage a diverse workforce and serve a diverse clientele will not survive. They will become increasingly irrelevant. This is the *bottom line* rationale.
3. But there is a third reason to embrace diversity: it works better than homogeneity. There is evidence that heterogeneous groups are more effective at solving complex problems than groups where everyone is the same. The groups where everyone is the same may solve problems more quickly. They work faster because members share assumptions and ways of seeing things. But the mixed groups come up with more creative, innovative ideas. They have the benefit of different perspectives and vantage points and worldviews. This is the *excellence* rationale.

I want to focus next on what it takes to be an organization that truly fosters diversity—on what it takes to be what I call a culturally competent organization. There are three core components of a culturally competent organization or institution. And these three components apply whether it is a school or a college, a library, a community-based nonprofit, a governmental entity, or a Fortune 500 company.

First, there must be opportunities for access for all—opportunities for people of all backgrounds and cultures to participate, to join in, to engage. In a university, this means welcoming students, staff, and faculty from all walks of life. In a public library, this means serving customers and users of all ages and abilities and languages. If your school or library or organization doesn't look like the community around it, if it doesn't mirror the world, you've got some work to do.

Issues of access to higher education have broken wide open this year with the launch of MOOCs (massive online open courses), where anyone from around the world who has access to a computer can take a course from a leading scholar at a top-tier university. The University of Maryland has joined Coursera, which is one of the MOOC companies, and we are offering

four courses this spring. Dr. Elsa Barkley Brown will teach a course on Women in the Civil Rights Movement. The dean of our College of Arts and Humanities told me that an African American woman, who lives in Louisiana, contacted Dr. Brown to see if her book club, composed of women, most of whom had not attended college, could take the course. The answer, of course, is yes! How incredible to be able to foster this kind of access!

Access is important, but so is success. In the university, it is not enough to simply admit students from historically underrepresented groups; we also have to ensure that the structures and supports are in place for their success. It is not enough to simply hire women in technical fields; it is also important to make sure that they don't bump up against a glass ceiling. It is not enough for employees from underrepresented groups to be brought in and to languish at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy; they need to be provided opportunities for supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions. Access and success must go hand-in-hand. That is the first key element of the culturally competent organization.

The second component of a culturally competent organization is a positive climate. It is important to create and sustain a climate that is welcoming, affirming, and embracing of all people. It is about creating an atmosphere of inclusion, where people feel respected and affirmed, regardless of their culture, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

Inclusion means that students don't have to check their heritage at the campus gates. It means that employees can bring their whole selves to work. Creating an inclusive climate means going beyond counting heads. It means understanding people's experiences, the vibe, what it feels like. The old-school notion was: "Come on in. We're glad to have you. We want you to be like us. Dress like us, talk like us, act like us. Learn from us, and you'll be just fine. If you're a little uncomfortable, just try to adjust." The modern notion is: "Come on in. We're glad to have you—with all of your uniqueness. We want to learn from you, and we hope you will learn from us. We know that we'll be better and stronger because you're part of us. It may be uncomfortable at times for all of us. We know we'll make some mistakes. But let's join together to make this work." The old notion is the melting pot. The modern idea is the salad bowl.

Creating and sustaining a positive climate for all is the second key aspect of a culturally competent organization. And getting the climate right can be tough because it means changing the culture of the organization—questioning our assumptions about how we do what we do, recognizing that our ways of doing business reflect a particular cultural framework, not universal truths, and developing a culture that is responsive to the values and worldviews of many.

The third element of a culturally competent organization is the infusion of diverse perspectives throughout the substantive work of the organization. In schools and colleges, this means that the educational curricula must reflect the diversity of the students and of our world. It means a recognition that students need to hear and learn from a multiplicity of

worldviews and standpoints, that they need to be knowledgeable about diverse cultures and identities, that they need skills in interacting with people who are quite different from themselves. It means a recognition that all students, regardless of their planned career or profession or locale, will need these capacities—that to live and work effectively and be a good global citizen in today's world requires us as individuals to be culturally competent.

Infusing diversity into the curricula means that this material is not simply relegated to the diversity course or to the fifteenth week of the semester. It also means that it is not enough to have one faculty member who is the diversity expert, while it is business as usual for the rest of the faculty. So whether the subject is English, engineering, art history, or information sciences, the curricula need to integrate relevant content from diverse cultural vantage points. In addition, all courses need to utilize pedagogical approaches that respond to the learning styles of diverse learners. Not everyone learns in the same way. Not everyone accesses and processes information in the same way. There are cultural differences in learning styles and approaches. So teaching in a diverse, inclusive manner not only has to do with the content of the course but also with the teaching methods, with how we teach.

In the culturally competent organization, there is access and success, a positive climate regardless of one's identity group, and the infusion of diverse perspectives throughout the substance of the work. The culturally competent organization is one where diversity is part and parcel of the fabric of the institution.

A few years ago, when I was at a university in California, we convened a diversity retreat for the president's cabinet and brought in Dr. Roosevelt Thomas, a nationally renowned diversity expert. At one point, we got stuck in discussing the diversity work that we were doing, and Dr. Thomas asked: "Is diversity a program or is it 'part and parcel'?" In other words, is diversity something that happens in one particular office? Is it the work of one or two people? Is it something aimed at a particular group of students, staff, or faculty? Or is diversity "part and parcel" of the university—embedded in all aspects, in every office, in everyone's job? The message: Diversity needs to be a consideration in all that we do.

I am very proud of the University of Maryland: we have an ethnically diverse student body, with more than a third of our undergraduate students identifying as black, Latino, or Asian. In the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of women faculty. We were recently named a Top-25 LGBT-Friendly Campus. We are leaders in increasing access to higher education. And we believe in inclusive excellence—the notion that to be an excellent university we must be diverse and inclusive. And this cannot simply be a program—it must be part and parcel.

We're not there yet. Our work here continues on. I hope yours does, too.

Kumea Shorter-Gooden: chief diversity officer and associate vice president at the University of Maryland, College Park. In January 2012, Shorter-Gooden was appointed as the first chief diversity officer at the University of Maryland, College Park. Formerly she served as associate provost for International-Multicultural Initiatives at Alliant International University and as professor and coordinator of multicultural community/clinical psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology. She is the coauthor of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, which is a winner of the 2004 American Book Award. A fellow of the American Psychological Association, she earned a PhD in clinical/community psychology from the University of Maryland, College Park. E-mail: kshorter@umd.edu.