



Prevention Collaboration in Action

Keeping the Collaboration Healthy

Tips for Ensuring a Culturally Competent Collaboration

Cultural competence describes the ability of an individual or organization to understand, interact, and engage with people who have different values, culture, languages, lifestyles, and traditions based on their distinctive heritage and social relationships.

While cultural competence is just one of many approaches to advancing behavioral health equity, it can serve as an effective starting point for successful collaborations. At its core, cultural competence champions the fundamental principle that individuals should have a voice in matters affecting their health and communities.

By integrating cultural competence into our collaborative efforts, we embrace a deeper understanding of the needs, strengths, and experiences of others. This approach allows us to better understand who our prospective partners are, what is important to them, and how they view substance misuse in their community. We can gain valuable insight into those cultural factors that serve as protective measures against substance use, and we can begin to create a collaborative environment that genuinely and meaningfully engage all stakeholders. Such culturally competent collaborations are, in turn, more likely to produce effective approaches to prevention and reduce entrenched disparities.

Cultural competence isn't a quick fix; it can't be accomplished simply by following a set of culturally responsive rules and recommendations. However, here are some tips for beginning the process of increasing the cultural competence of your collaborative efforts:

- **Involve people with lived and living experiences.** Include people who have experience with substance use, past or present, as they are experts in this field. Consider including their family members, friends, as well as others who are negatively impacted by

disparities. Provide meaningful partnership and engagement opportunities, encourage their active participation, and champion joint decision-making.

- **Educate coalition members on issues of equity, inclusion, and disparities.** Be deliberate and don't make assumptions about what people know (or don't know). Provide ongoing capacity-building opportunities to help members understand the importance of patience, meeting people where they are, and truly listening to our partners' perspectives. Offer educational resources to help them continue to build their cultural competence.
- **Be humble.** Cultural humility can be described as the capacity to maintain a perspective that is focused on others and open to understanding the aspects of cultural identity that hold the greatest significance for individuals. While education is the foundation for cultural competence, cultural humility requires self-reflection, lifelong learning, and a commitment to correcting injustices.
- **Reach out to culturally relevant organizations to build connections.** For example, if you want to connect with members of a new immigrant population in your community, reach out to organizations that provide services to this population. They can help you identify informal leaders who can in turn help you network with others.
- **Develop policies and practices that support the meaningful involvement of all coalition members and partners.** Make sure representatives from historically underserved populations have a central role in decision-making and are empowered to assume leadership positions and then provided with support in these roles, as needed.
- **Reconsider concepts like "capacity" and "productivity."** We often have a narrow definition of these terms which can prevent us from recognizing and appreciating the contributions of people with skills and experiences that are different from our own. Ask others (coalition members and partners) to identify their strengths and define what success looks like to them. Keep in mind that success and productivity should reflect the quality—not just the quantity—of our collaborations, relationships, and interactions.
- **Make sure all materials reflect the culture, preferred language, and background of the populations they are meant to serve.** For example, in tribal communities, symbols have significant meaning, as do colors. There are many dialects in the Spanish language; therefore, some terms and their uses can vary depending on the audience's country of origin. Understanding and using the most appropriate terms and phrases for your

intended audience helps to ensure that materials are welcomed and not deemed offensive.

- **Be deliberate about getting input.** Take time to involve partners in meaningful ways *throughout* the prevention planning process. It is important to create an environment that encourages the honest exchange of ideas and recognizes everyone's contributions. Don't just wait until 'after the fact' to collect input.