Components of a Training Program for Understanding and Valuing Diversity

Diane Fisher

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a rapidly shrinking world. Communication, travel and changing demographics have made contact with other cultures more the rule than the expectation. The 1990s have been referred to as the age of the global community.

But community begins at home—in Calgary or Kansas City—or wherever people live and work together! As volunteer leaders, we are called upon to develop programs that reflect the realities and needs of the community.... We are being called to manage more and more ethnoculturally diverse volunteer resources.

The variables encountered in multiethnic programs are countless. Above all we, as volunteer leaders, must be prepared for the job at hand. The skills needed for the intercultural encounter are not automatic. Our most natural state is one of ethnocentrism, that is, surrounded by one's own culture, and quite oblivious to the dynamics of diverse cultures, values or even attitudes. In this state the assumption is that one's own way of doing things is superior.

The skills necessary to intercultural work are learned through training and experience. It is only through this exposure that we can place our own cultural identity and that of others in a proper perspective, facilitating crosscultural communication.

This model (see Figure 1) begins with self discovery and understanding of the role of culture in our lives. It explores the concept of cultural awareness and the dynamics of cultural interaction. Skills, abilities and training important to the intercultural encounter are discussed. Other components include a look at social systems, as well as the processes of adaptation and integration into a new cultural environment.

Intercultural training is essential to any multiethnic program. The volunteer manager must be well prepared. Other agency staff working with the volunteers also should receive the training, as should volunteers. Volunteers who work with clients from varied cultural backgrounds will especially benefit from the sessions.

This is an integrated model in that all components are interrelated and important to the whole picture. There is flexibility in topic areas chosen, depending on the time available and the needs of the program. The sections on self-awareness and culture are a logical beginning point.
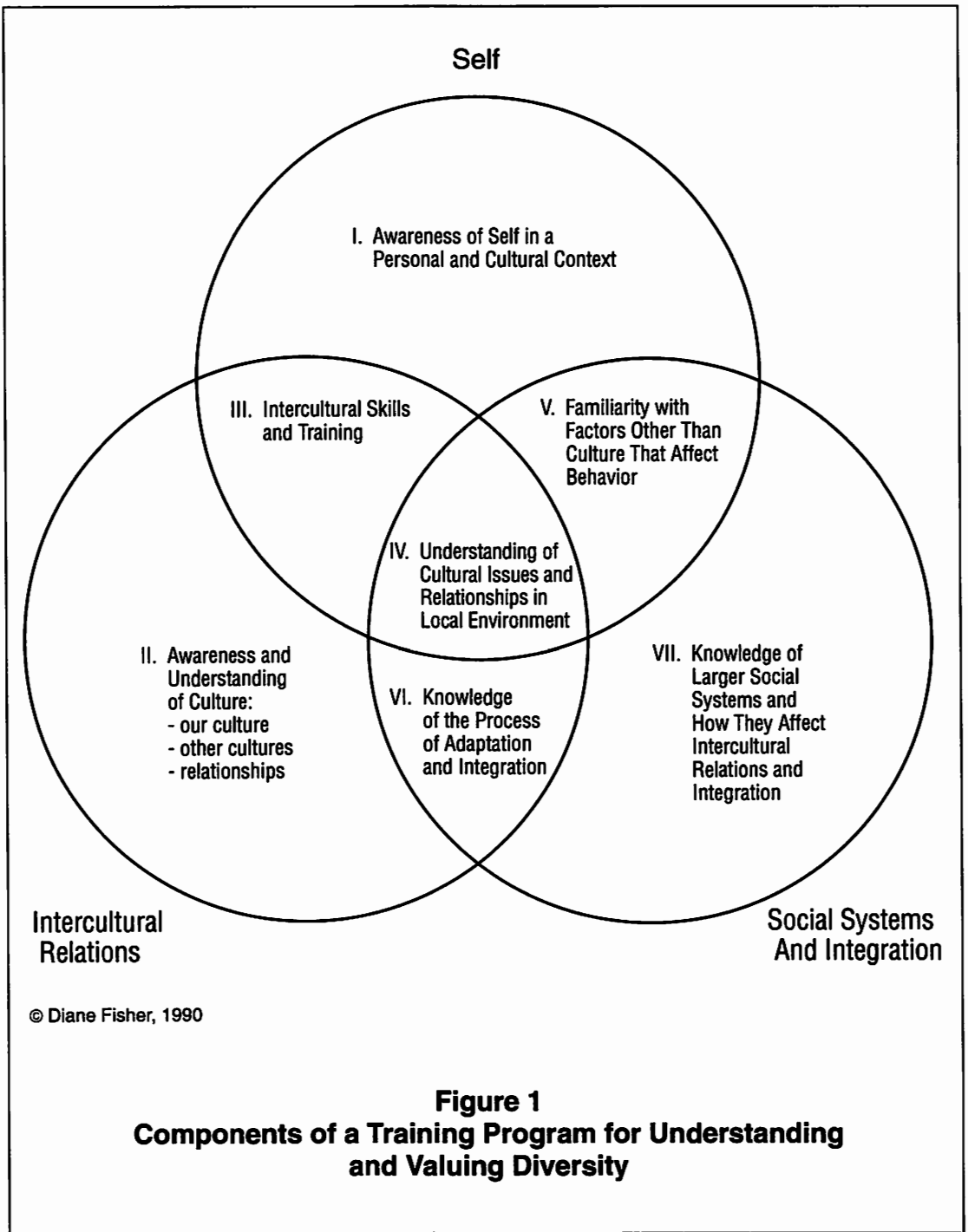
I. SELF-AWARENESS

Purpose: To explore self in the personal and cultural context. To create awareness of self as a cultural being.

Topics:
  a) Personal values and beliefs
  b) Behavior/role within personal milieu
  c) Personal history
  d) Past experience
  e) Education
  f) Skills/abilities
  g) Ethnicity
  h) Culture
  i) Personality

Training notes: An individual brings to every interaction a personal history, personality, cultural background, and values and beliefs which are reflected in attitude and behavior. An important component of any intercultural training program encourages participants to discover those aspects of self in order to communicate more effectively with the environment.

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Self

I. Awareness of Self in a Personal and Cultural Context

III. Intercultural Skills and Training

V. Familiarity with Factors Other Than Culture That Affect Behavior

IV. Understanding of Cultural Issues and Relationships in Local Environment

II. Awareness and Understanding of Culture:
- our culture
- other cultures
- relationships

VI. Knowledge of the Process of Adaptation and Integration

VII. Knowledge of Larger Social Systems and How They Affect Intercultural Relations and Integration

Intercultural Relations

Social Systems And Integration

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Figure 1
Components of a Training Program for Understanding and Valuing Diversity

This first section of self-awareness:
1. Defines for the individual those dynamics of self (content).
2. Provides opportunities for self-understanding through the use of exercises such as "value" questionnaires (process).

3. Encourages further learning and application of self-awareness through interactive work, *i.e.*, discussions on different values or belief perspectives and/or the exploration of different perceptions of a common experience (process).

II. THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE

Purpose: To gain awareness and understanding of the concept of culture and to explore the social dynamics of culture.

Topics:
- a) Definition of culture
- b) Knowledge and acceptance of own culture
- c) Relationship of culture and behavior
- d) Relationship of culture and language
- e) Culture and ethnicity
- f) Ethnocentrism (definition)
- g) Knowledge of other culture(s)
- h) Culture similarities and differences

Training notes: "Culture" dictates rules for living, expectations that come into play when people interact. Simply defined it consists of "a way of life for a group of people."

Included in the definition of culture are values and beliefs, language, customs, external culture (food, dress), and etiquette/style of communication.

The ethnoculturally diverse encounter presents challenges to communication. It demands awareness of the dynamics of culture and the implications of cultural diversity within communication in order to overcome the barriers presented by ethnocentrism (the tendency to evaluate our world from our own perspective).

This section explores these definitions and relationships (content). It facilitates the experience of diverse interactions through role play, group discussions, or the creation of culturegrams (process).

Published Culturegrams may be an asset to this section (see Suggested Resources).

III. INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

Purpose: To identify skills, abilities and training important to intercultural interaction.

Topics:
- a) Cross-cultural communication
  - 1) verbal
  - 2) non-verbal
- b) Understanding of language
- c) Professional/technical skills
- d) Knowledge of resources
- e) Intercultural training
- f) Skills related to volunteer role/function

- g) Interpersonal skills
- h) Vision

Training notes: This section is focused on the development of intercultural communication skills. Verbal, as well as nonverbal, interaction are explored. Learning to work with an interpreter or even the acquisition of a few words in another language can be an important skill here. Information on resources important to intercultural work is welcome as handouts (content).

Role playing, videotaping, individual and group exercises are all useful process strategies for this section. For instance, exercises can aid in better understanding how "body language" or communication style can differ across cultures. Role playing facilitates learning how to communicate effectively through the use of interpreters (process).

IV. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE LOCAL SETTING (common to all three categories of the model)

Purpose: To explore the intercultural dynamics, needs and issues within one's own community.

Topics:
- a) In the community (city, rural)
- b) In the workplace
- c) In the volunteer setting
- d) Demography
- e) The ethnocultural communities
- f) Intercultural relations
- g) Special needs
- h) Resources/services—are they adequate?
- i) Community education/development
- k) Positive and negative factors

Training notes: Here the focus is on the specific environment surrounding the group (agency, company, hospital, etc.). What are the cultural/intercultural dynamics at work within the setting? Is it an ethnoculturally diverse group? Is communication effective? What would make it better? How do we, as a group, relate to the "larger picture" (process)?

Questions of this nature are explored through group process. Group self-discovery and transition management are important training strategies for this section.

V. OTHER FACTORS THAT AFFECT BEHAVIOR

Purpose: To identify and understand factors other than culture that affect behavior within the intercultural encounter (individually and collectively).

Topics:
- a) Attitude and its relation to behavior
- b) Perceptions and how they differ
- c) Stereotype—definition
- d) Prejudice—definition
- e) Discrimination (personal and institutional)
- f) Racism and its effects
- g) International relations
- h) Age/sex

Training notes: Attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices color thinking and affect interactions. In this section participants explore the concepts of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (individual or collective) in order to better understand how these interfere with healthy and effective interaction (content).

Exercises that aid the individual and the group in discovering how perceptions, stereotypes, and biases affect us all are well used here. Simple questions such as, "What stereotypes have been applied to you? How do you feel about that?" (process) are appropriate here.

VI. THE PROCESSES OF ADAPTATION/ INTEGRATION

Purpose: To better understand the processes of adaptation and integration into a new cultural environment.

Topics:
- a) Migration history and its effects
- b) Culture shock
- c) The adaptation process
- d) Changes in support systems
- e) Intergenerational stress
- f) Barriers to adjustment: language, culture, skills
- g) Language acquisition
- h) Satisfactory employment
- i) Integration

Training Notes: During the time of settlement and integration of newcomers into a new cultural environment many factors come into play. Newcomers may experience a general disorientation in relation to the new setting, often referred to as culture shock. Their support systems may be lost or significantly changed. Language and cultural barriers interfere with day-to-day functioning.

This section helps the participant to better understand the dynamics of this transition. This knowledge is especially valuable where volunteers or the client population are recent immigrants (content).

Case studies are excellent learning opportunities for the group here. The exploration of process models (*i.e.* culture shock—American Peace Corps) is also a good strategy for the group or individual (process).

VII. THE BROADER PICTURE

Purpose: To gain knowledge of larger social systems and how they affect intercultural relations and integration.

Topics:
- a) National immigration policy
- b) Other government policies
- c) Dominant culture/subcultures
- d) The legal system
- e) The educational system
- f) Health care (physical and mental)
- g) Social services and welfare
- h) Economic systems
- i) Employment/unemployment/ equity
- j) Professional associations
- k) Recreation
- l) Immigrant serving services
- m) Media and communications systems

Training notes: How do larger social systems support or discourage diversity and intercultural integration? What resources exist to support the development of ethno-culturally diverse volunteer programs? Diverse client population? These social issues/questions are explored in this final section (process).

Information is collected/presented/ distributed as it relates to program needs. Discussion groups aid in the formulation of strategies for improved networking and resource development in the "broader picture" (content and process).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Training Design: This model is designed to educate on three levels:
1) self-awareness and attitude;
2) knowledge;
3) experience and skill development.

A variety of theoretical presentations is used to define main topic areas, which is then enhanced by experiential and practical exercises and group discussions. Exercises should have a clear purpose—to make a point, create awareness and understanding, or to develop skills.

The overall objectives are to: facilitate cultural self-discovery, to enhance intercultural understanding, and to develop communication skills for use in the ethnoculturally diverse setting.

The training strategy combines aspects of content and process throughout topic areas.

Trouble Spots: Intercultural training touches on deeply personal aspects of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Participants can feel uncomfortable and the trainer may be called to skillfully yet sensitively deal with resistance/concerns early in the process.

Goal/Evaluation: Central to the model diagram, #4, which relates to the local setting, is also an overall goal for the organization using this model—an effective ethnoculturally diverse volunteer program. Improved cross-cultural functioning in that setting—in understanding, communication, and relationship—is the best measure of training success.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:
1) Local intercultural consultants/ trainers.
2) International Organizations:
   • SIETAR International
     (Society for International Education, Training, and Research)
     1505 – 22nd St. NW
     Washington D.C. 20037 U.S.A.
     Publication: *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*
   • AFS Intercultural Programs
     313 – 43rd Street
     New York, New York 10017 U.S.A.

3) National and local government publications
4) Local university and college publications/social science resources— psychology, sociology, anthropology
5) Culturegrams:
   Brigham Young University Centre
   Publication Services
   Box 61 FOB
   Provo, Utah 84602 U.S.A.
6) Magazine and Journal Articles:
   • Kohls, Robert. *The Values Americans Live By.* Meridian House, International, 1984.
   • Muniz, Peter and Chasnoff, R. *The Cultural Awareness Hierarchy: A Model for Promoting Understanding.* Training and Development Journal, Vol. III, (No. 10), October 1983, pp. 24-27.
   • Sluzki, Carlos, M.D. *Migration and Family Conflict.* Family Process, December 1979, Volume 18, No. 4.

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