

## **Cultural Competence: Where Do I Begin?**

As we have discussed in past issues, cultural competence is an important and valuable concept and initiative within the constructs of a mental health management system and provider network. Often times, the question is asked about what do you do to start this type of initiative and how do you implement it.

A successful cultural competence initiative consists of three phases: preparation & assessment, implementation, and maintenance. These phases are essential if an agency or company's commitment is true. The preparation & assessment phase consists of ensuring that the senior leadership of the organization is invested and committed to cultural competence. This can be observed through upholding cultural competence in high esteem and importance, and through the integration of cultural competence within the strategic planning process. Cultural competence is not a separate initiative or plan throughout the organization. It should be woven into the internal fabric of an organization.

In this phase of planning, there should be stakeholder, provider, and consumer involvement. It is ideal that some type of organizational assessment is conducted so that there is an understanding of the extent to which the organization serves the diverse community in which they are located. The assessment will also help in the development of a cultural competence or diversity plan that is consistent with the strategic plan. The plan should identify goals, have timelines, and should state how the plan is to be implemented. A plan to communicate to the larger organization should also be included.

Phase two is the implementation of the plan. I often recommend that organizations choose initial goals that are easier to accomplish. This boosts morale and confidence that goals can be successfully achieved. It is also wise to only work on a few goals at a time. After successful implementation of a few goals, add additional ones. Implementation often exposes the strengths and opportunity areas of an organization, so don't become afraid. This is good and offers additional opportunities for agency growth and understanding. It is also beneficial to establish a cultural

competence in committee to assist in implementing and eventually sustaining a plan.

The last phase is sustainability and maintenance of a cultural competence plan and initiative. Organizations are often challenged when it comes to sustaining this type of initiative. Having a good plan helps to alleviate this problem. Key tips would be to have a process in place that encourages continual evaluation, reporting and accountability for every identified goal. It is important to be open to management trainings and any type of specialized training, if opportunity areas present themselves. Giving consistent feedback to leadership and the organization's Board of Directors can aid in engaging every level of the organization. A cultural competence committee is vital in assisting with the maintenance of a plan.

Developing, implementing, and sustaining cultural competence is tough but not impossible. It takes dedication and commitment to the philosophy and a willingness to work strategically to bring about change.

This topic, *Starting a Cultural Competence Initiative*, along with *Developing an Agency Specific Cultural Competence Plan* was presented at the Fall 2009 FARO conference in Asheville, NC.