FLEXing Cross-cultural Communication

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Multicultural competence is a phrase that acknowledges the ability of a person to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries with sensitivity to the cultural differences and preferences involved on both sides of those boundaries. Achieving multicultural competence challenges an individual to know his or her own culture and the cultures of others and to employ that knowledge by engaging people of other cultures in mutually gainful and productive conversations in our communication. Learning multicultural competence and sustaining its practice in our communication is imperative in order for people to live, communicate, and remain connected to one another.

Multicultural competence incorporates knowledge and skills that enable people to engage in culturally responsive ways of interacting and functioning in the world (Romary, 2002). It further incorporates the capacity for self-awareness and the ability to adapt to one's environment (Cheesebor, O'Connor, and Riots, 2006). All these factors impact the ability to communicate with one another from a culturally competent stance.

Writing on cross-cultural communication skills, Clyde W. Ford submits that cultivating an "us-versus-them" schema by reacting defensively to the speaker's emotional messages can promote an "opposing forces" perspective (1994). However, when we step back from an interaction and reflect on its path, we can change the style of our understanding and response by listening to the speaker's message. Ford advises us to call the following approaches into service in our communication: build mutual understanding...bridge differences...reflect on similarity of values...seek agreement through synthesis...[and] hold the line. Such culturally responsive communication helps us to express our thoughts freely, whether in a loud or soft voice, to the listener in the form of communication. It requires, perhaps most importantly, a willingness on the part of the listener to engage in this form of communication. According to the level of cross-communication that authors such as Ford (1994) and Cheesebor, O'Connor, and Riots (2006) describe, is a benchmark of multi-culturally competent people. They are able to recognize that a person's own way of thinking and behaving is not the only way. Because they recognize that there are multiple paths to achieving goals, they are able to think and behave flexibly. Moreover, the sense that our universe is a place inhabited by multiplicity and diversity encourages in multi-culturally competent people the ability to be comfortable with differences in others.

The FLEX model below was adapted from a training program developed by M. Arnous and T. Williams (2001) that was used in the Office of Training and Development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This model offers suggestions for developing multicultural competence:

- Foster interconnectedness
  - Understand your own values, beliefs and practices

LISTEN and communicate
- Understand one's frame of reference
- Paraphrase ideas through describing; avoid judgment
- State ideas clearly and constructively

Encourage respect
- Treat others as they would like to be treated
- Consider working with people on their terms
- Preserve dignity
- Ask questions
- Approach people, ideas, behaviors and actions with curiosity
- Approach ambiguity

This FLEX model provides an introductory tool for constant referent for understanding and practicing multicultural competency.

CONCLUSION

This FLEX model provides more than the upbeat thought process promoted via its compact phrases. Behind each phrase crouches its behavior-affecting analysis. For example, if we do not foster interconnectedness and listen and communicate, how can we arrive at an understanding of people of other cultures' values, beliefs and practices? If we do not encourage respect and explore differences between cultures, how are we to rid our behavior of the anger-invoking insensitivities of communication that distance us from people of other cultures? Utilizing the genuinely effective communication filters, as well as the opportunity for thoughtful introspection and relaxed behavior, offered in this FLEX model promotes access to multicultural competence. This tool may spark a motivation to frame words to those from other cultures in ways that engender mutual benefit. When we accomplish that, we inhabit the realm of multi-culturally competent communicators.

The Personal is Political

Richard (Chip) Smith

Being involved in the struggle against white supremacy is, first, a personal decision. But it is not always clear. Doing so is essential, however, to building a movement—person by person, in a widening circle of activity and commitment.