



Cultural Competency

**St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers
Diversity Committee, Cultural Competency Sub-Committee**

*Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past
- let us accept our own responsibility for the future."
John F. Kennedy
February 18, 1958*

MISSION STATEMENT

The Diversity Committee of the St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers, an organization committed to jobsite safety, productivity, and workforce readiness, seeks to advance the achievement of sustainable diversity and inclusion in the St. Louis construction industry through initiatives and programs designed to promote the knowledge, acceptance, and implementation of cultural competency at all levels of the construction workplace – office to field.

ABSTRACT

Since its inception in the mid-90's, the charge of the St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers' Diversity Committee has been to advance the achievement of sustainable diversity and inclusion in the St. Louis construction industry. While great strides have been made, the achievement of sustainability has remained elusive.

In a nation, state, and metropolitan region where diversity is a given reality, navigating cultural differences and cultivating a safe and productive workforce are essential to economic growth. Consequently, realizing economic growth depends on promoting cultural competency, if sustainable diversity and inclusion is to be achieved.

Business Roundtable¹, an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies working to promote sound public policy and a thriving U.S. economy, leads the National Network of Business and Industry Associates, which brings together sector-specific organizations and businesses to develop certification standards for workers. The National Network's ultimate goal is to align learning with solid employment opportunities and life successes.

An outcome of the National Network of Business and Industry Associates is the

report titled, “Common Employability Skills – A Foundation for Success in the Workplace: *The Skills All Employees Need, No Matter Where They Work.*”² This report states, “Today, employers in every industry sector emphasize the need for employees with certain foundational skills.” The core set of fundamental skills needed by employees in the workplace are “People Skills,” “Personal Skills,” “Workplace Skills,” and “Applied Knowledge.”

The skill set “People Skills” includes three specifics:

TEAMWORK: *Demonstrating the ability to work effectively with others,*

COMMUNICATION: *Maintaining open lines of communication with others,* and

RESPECT: *Working effectively with those who have diverse backgrounds.*

The skill set “People Skills” aligns directly with the call for cultural competency in the St. Louis construction industry to achieve sustainable diversity and inclusion.

The intention of the St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers’ Diversity Committee is to foster conversations and the exchange of ideas pertaining to the relationship between cultural competency and diversity and inclusion in the construction industry.

This objective will advance the understanding of cultural competency as the essential cornerstone to achieving sustainable diversity and inclusion in St. Louis’ construction industry. Moreover, without cultural competency from the “corner office” to “boots on the ground,” jobsite safety, workforce readiness, and productivity in the workplace are compromised.

Twenty-first century demographics in the United States, and specifically in St. Louis, demand cultural competency in every construction workplace, from the office to the field. The train has left the station. It is time to get on board!

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Introduction to Cultural Competency

The United States, like most advanced industrial Western societies is experiencing a demographic transformation that will unquestionably change the way most companies, large and small, conduct business. Companies/industries who are ready and understand that cultural competency and diversity are fundamental to business success will be the true winners in the culturally complex United States of the 21st century³.

Curt Coffman and Kathie Sorensen in their *New York Times* best selling book, *Culture Eats Strategy For Lunch*, state, “ Nature is clear. So is business: evolve or die . . . To survive in this new economy, many companies have placed their faith in strategy, brand, and innovation . . . what goes wrong isn’t the strategy; rather, success or failure is a result of the organization’s culture The brand promise may be crafted at the strategy level, but it is the organization’s culture that either delivers or breaks that promise.”⁴

Cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate settings to increase safety, productivity, workforce readiness, and the quality of services, thereby, producing better outcomes.

Cultural competence is also the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, socio-cultural, and linguistic diversity.

“Equity is society's commitment to meet people where they are and provide for each the resources necessary to enable them to achieve at their highest levels. Equity is about respecting each person's inherent worth and acknowledging in word and in deed that the primary infrastructures of our society have failed to do so.”⁵

“[The] notion of racial equity is closely tied to the notion of gaps. Data consistently show gaps in the performance of society’s various systems and markets, yielding very different results for different racial and ethnic groups. . . These GAPS are maintained . . . by denial of equal opportunity and equal protection.”

“Achieving greater racial equity means achieving greater social justice. It means closing those gaps – in our educational systems, our justice systems, our job and capital markets, and so on. . .

Inequity exists to the extent that a particular system or market does NOT perform equally for different groups, on average. . . The good news is, because such systems

are [created/constructed over time], they can be changed in ways that achieve greater equity. . .”⁶

They can be changed over time by means of:

- ◆ Education
- ◆ Soft Skills
- ◆ Transportation Issues
- ◆ Employment Skills/Strategies - Networking
- ◆ Apprenticeship Access
- ◆ Workplace Environment
- ◆ Intercultural Competence Education/Training
- ◆ Grievance Resolutions
- ◆ Mentoring

The majority of these issues point to areas *external* to the actual construction job market. They can ALL be in place without ANY measurable closing of the gap of racial equity in the actual job/workplace environment.

It is necessary to actively engage in crafting and advancing solutions that can help close that gap. Some suggestions for engagement:

- ◆ Develop/disseminate zero tolerance policies for workplace bullying – it is against the law – developing educational/training modules to educate workers about this practice and exactly what is included in workplace bullying, along with punitive company policies when bullying is practiced
- ◆ Develop/disseminate zero tolerance policies for workplace discrimination and sexual harassment policies – it is against the law; educational benefits for workers, along with punitive company policies when discrimination and sexual harassment is exercised
- ◆ Develop/disseminate educational modules for implicit/unconscious bias to more fully understand and act on one’s own attitudes and actions in the workplace
- ◆ Develop/disseminate inter-cultural competency educational modules to foster workplace safety, productivity, and workforce stability within an expanding environment of decreasing workers along with expanded demographic diversity
- ◆ Work in partnership with owners/buyers of construction services to embrace these issues as promoting “more construction for their money” and to increasingly incorporate them as part of their project general conditions, thus requiring general contractors and subcontractors to provide evidence of their adherence to these policies and practices; not doing so can/will result in an inability to bid/negotiate these projects.

Over time, hiring and retention should reflect the practices of these policies, and thereby, result in increased racial equity through cultural shifts in the workplace

Stages of Cultural Competency Development

Cultural Knowledge > Cultural Awareness > Cultural Sensitivity > Cultural Competency

Cultural competency evolves over time through the process of **attaining cultural knowledge, becoming aware** of when cultural mores, values, beliefs and practices are being demonstrated, **sensitivity to these behaviors** is consciously occurring, and **one purposely utilizes culturally based techniques** in dealing with the workplace and with service delivery.

The idea of more effective cross-cultural capabilities is captured in **many terms similar to cultural competence**. Cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity all **convey the idea of improving cross-cultural capacity**, as illustrated in the following definitions:⁸

Cultural Knowledge: familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems, and behaviors of the members of another group (Diane L. Adams, 1995).

Cultural Awareness: developing sensitivity and understanding of another group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge (Diane L. Adams, 1995).

Cultural Sensitivity: knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences (National . . . Center on Cultural Competency, 1997).



Levels of Cultural Competency Development

- 1. Destructiveness:** Attitudes, policies and practices destructive to other cultures; purposeful destruction and dehumanization of other cultures; assumption of cultural superiority; eradication of other cultures; or exploitation by dominant groups. The complete erosion of one's culture by contact with another is rare in today's society.
- 2. Incapacity:** Unintentional cultural destructiveness; a biased system, with a paternal attitude toward other groups; ignorance, fear of other groups and cultures; or discriminatory practices, lowering expectations and devaluing of groups.
- 3. Blindness:** The philosophy of being unbiased; the belief that culture, class or color makes no difference, and that traditionally used approaches are universally applicable; a well-intentioned philosophy, but still an ethnocentric approach.
- 4. Pre-Competence:** The realization of weaknesses in working with other cultures; implementation of training, assessment of needs, and use of diversity criteria when hired; desire for inclusion, commitment to civil rights; includes the danger of a false sense of accomplishment and tokenism.
- 5. Competence:** Acceptance and respect for differences; continual assessment of sensitivity to other cultures; expansion of knowledge; and hiring a diverse and unbiased staff.
- 6. Proficiency:** Cultures are held in high esteem; constant development of new approaches; seeking to add to knowledge base; advocates for cultural competency with all systems and organizations.

Terms and Definitions⁹

Definitions are numerous for the terms listed below. Our goal is to present terms and definitions most applicable to fostering conversations and the exchange of ideas pertaining to the relationship between cultural competency and diversity/inclusion in construction.

They are intended to advance the understanding of cultural competency as the essential cornerstone to achieving sustainable diversity/inclusion in St. Louis' construction industry. Moreover, without cultural competency from the "corner office" to "boots on the ground," jobsite safety, workforce readiness, and productivity in the workplace are compromised.

Culture – *a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.*

- ◆ Culture is learned.
- ◆ Culture is a set of shared interpretations
- ◆ Culture involves beliefs, values, norms, and social practices.

- ◆ Culture affects behavior.
- ◆ Culture involves large groups of people.

Race – commonly refers to certain physical similarities, such as skin color or eye shape, that are shared by a group of people and are used to mark or separate them from others.

- ◆ Contrary to popular notions, race is not primarily a biological term. It is a political and societal term that originated to defend economic and social distinctions.
- ◆ Sometimes race and culture seem to work hand in hand to create visible and important distinctions among groups within a larger society. Sometimes race plays a part in establishing separate cultural groups.

Ethnicity – *Ethnic group* is another term often used interchangeably with culture. **Ethnicity** is actually a term that is used to refer to a wide variety of groups who might share a language, historical origins, religion, nation-state, or cultural system.

Intercultural Competence – using your knowledge, motivation, and skills to deal appropriately and effectively with cultural differences.

Cultural Identity – refers to one's sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. It is formed in a process that results from membership in a particular culture, and it involves learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture. People internalize the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify with that culture as part of their self-concept.

Social Identity – develops as a consequence of memberships in particular groups within one's culture. For example, people who strongly identify with their particular profession likely view themselves as "belonging" to "their" group of professionals, with whom they have similar traits and share similar concerns.

Ethnocentrism – the notion that the beliefs, values, norms, and practices of one's own culture are superior to those of others. People generally perceive their own experiences, which are shaped by their own cultural forces, as natural, human, and universal. Ethnocentrism tends to highlight and exaggerate cultural differences and is a learned belief in cultural superiority.

Stereotyping – a selection process that is used to organize and simplify perceptions of others. Stereotypes are a form of generalization about some group of people. When people stereotype others, they take a category of people and make assertions about the characteristics of all people who belong to that category.

Prejudice – refers to negative attitudes toward other people that are based on faulty and inflexible stereotypes. Prejudiced attitudes include irrational feelings of dislike and even hatred for certain groups, biased perceptions, and beliefs about the group members that are not based on direct experiences and firsthand knowledge, and a readiness to behave in negative and unjust ways toward members of the group.

Discrimination – *prejudice* refers to people's attitudes or mental representations, the term **discrimination** refers to the behavioral manifestations of that prejudice. Thus discrimination can be thought of a prejudice "in action."

Racism – a tendency to categorize people who are culturally different in terms of their physical traits, such as skin color, hair color and texture, facial structure, and eye shape . . . the cumulative effects of individuals, institutions, and cultures that result in the oppression of ethnic minorities . . . racism can occur at three distinct levels: individual, institutional, and cultural.

Tokenism – as a form of racism occurs when individuals do not perceive themselves as prejudiced because they make small concessions to, while holding basically negative attitudes toward, members of the other group. Tokenism is the practice of reverse discrimination, in which people go out of their way to favor a few members of another group in order to maintain their own self-concepts as individuals who believe in equality for all. Such behaviors may increase a person's esteem, but they may also decrease the possibilities for more meaningful contributions to intercultural unity and progress.

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1. <http://businessroundtable.org/>

2. https://businessroundtable.org/sites/default/files/Common%20Employability_asingle_fm.pdf

3. http://businessroundtable.org/sites/default/files/legacy/uploads/studies-reports/downloads/BRT_TakingActionEW_V903_10_04_13.pdf

4. Coffman, Curt W. and Kathie Sorensen, PhD; *Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch* (Denver, Colorado: Liang Addison Press, 2013)

5. David Dodson, President of MDC, Inc. (MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION) located in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, summarizing a group discussion with participants in a Ford Foundation conference on Community Philanthropy and Racial Equity in the American South

6. Steven E. Mayer, PhD, "Racial Equity" Effective Communities Project
http://www.effectivecommunities.com/pdfs/ECP_RacialEquity.pdf

7. https://utahculturalalliance.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/stages_and_levels_of_cultural_competency_development.pdf

8. See Diane L. Adams, 1995 for "Cultural Knowledge" and "Cultural Awareness"; see National . . . Center on Cultural Competency, 1997 for "Cultural Sensitivity"

9. "Terms and Definitions" adapted from Lustig, Myron W. and Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal communication Across Cultures*, 7th Edition