

10 TIPS TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH DIVERSE CLIENTS / CUSTOMERS



- 1. Stretch your understanding of diversity.** Because most current definitions of diversity are so broad, everyone is likely working with members of minority groups; differences may include addictions, age, chronic illness, cognitive ability, criminal records, disability (injury or developmental), education, ethnicity, family status, gender, geographic location, language, literacy, mental health, race, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status.
- 2. Reflect on your own biases, stereotypes, and assumptions.** Become aware of your blind spots; do background research, engage in active listening, identify trustworthy cultural informants, and continue to look for evidence that challenges your pre-existing beliefs about cultures you know little about. Awareness is the first step toward change.
- 3. Listen to your clients' / customers' stories.** Active listening is essential when serving members of diverse groups. Take time to understand others' worldviews; establish a foundation of trust and mutual respect that goes beyond superficial cultural clues.
- 4. Take a holistic approach.** Related to the previous tips, consider the interconnectedness of your clients' / customers' various group memberships and customize your approach accordingly.
- 5. Understand the process of transition.** Simply being aware of diversity issues isn't enough; recognize variables that impact transitions. Was the transition anticipated or unexpected? Does the individual have access to sufficient supports and resources?
- 6. Recognize systemic barriers.** Awareness of diversity, and sensitivity to diversity-related challenges, may contribute to tunnel vision in service providers (i.e., problems are seen as residing 100% within the client or customer). However, sometimes it doesn't matter how well-prepared your diverse clients / customers are if others aren't ready to welcome them. Consider advocacy and orientation strategies that may raise others' awareness and reduce barriers.
- 7. Choose appropriate tools and resources.** As you broaden your awareness of diversity and cultural influences on individual clients / customers, carefully review your products, services, and marketing strategies to ensure they are appropriate for all of the individuals you serve. Consider language, literacy level, graphics, case examples, displays, accommodations, accessibility, child-minding, access to interpretation, hours of operation, and anything else that could send a clear message that you welcome and are prepared for members of diverse groups.
- 8. Know when and where to refer.** Although cultural competence is important and helpful, it may be insufficient to meet the specific needs of some clients / customers. Form strategic partnerships with others in your community who offer complementary services or can serve as cultural informants. Build a strong, extensive network of specialized resources and services.
- 9. Advocate.** When you identify service gaps for diverse groups and clients with special needs, consider making a case for relevant changes in policy, funding, services, or even laws. Become a diversity champion – within your own organization, sector, region, and country.
- 10. Take a "hope-centered" approach.** "Pessimism and despair cannot support people as they try to make changes in their work and lives. Optimism, hope and a positive world view certainly can" (What Works?, 2010, p. 4). Fostering optimism and building hope for the future, therefore, are important strategies in your diversity toolkit. Optimism begins with you – do you really believe your diverse clients / customers have something wonderful to contribute? If so, move beyond *embracing diversity* to *tangible action* that will make a meaningful difference in their lives.



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604.856.2386
info@lifestrategies.ca
www.lifestrategies.ca