

EXPLORING AND VALUING DIVERSITY

Stereotyping

This unit addresses one of the most critical training needs that has surfaced in surveys of mentors and volunteer coordinators: the need to help mentors deal with diversity. Some mentors talked about “culture shock” in reference to their initial apprehension and lack of familiarity with, and/or understanding of, the world from which their mentees came. When you think about it, it is normal and natural to feel a certain amount of apprehension about meeting someone for the first time, especially if it’s expected that you will become a trusted friend. Add to that a significant difference in age, in socioeconomic status and/or in racial and ethnic background and it is easy to understand why this is such a critical issue for mentors.

Toward a broad definition of cultural diversity

Many mentor programs prefer to match mentees with mentors who come from similar backgrounds in terms of race, socioeconomic status, etc. Often this is not possible, and mentors are matched with young people who may look and act very differently than they do and whose backgrounds and lifestyles may be dissimilar to their own.

Culture, in this sense, is more than race or ethnicity. It encompasses values, lifestyle and social norms and includes issues such as different communication styles, mannerisms, ways of dressing, family structure, traditions, time orientation and response to authority. These differences may be associated with age, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. A lack of understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity can result in mentors becoming judgmental, which may prevent the development of a trusting relationship.

What can you do?

As in many other situations, knowledge is the key to understanding. Below are descriptions and examples of different diversity issues. Each has the potential to cause misunderstandings between a mentor and a mentee. However, cultural understanding is not something you can learn exclusively from a textbook. Talk to your mentee about his or her background and ancestry, about what life is like at school or home or with his or her friends. Find out the reasons for what he or she does. Your program director, other mentors, friends and coworkers may also have insights into cultural differences.

As you begin to learn and understand more about your mentee, you will be less likely to make negative value judgments. We hope that these examples will help you become more knowledgeable about and encourage you to explore your mentee’s cultural background.

Ethnic Diversity

If your mentee comes from a different ethnic background, learn about the values and traditions of that culture. Such things as the role of authority and family, communication styles, perspectives on time, ways of dealing with conflict and marriage traditions vary significantly among ethnic groups.

For example, people from Scandinavian and Asian cultures typically are not comfortable dealing directly with conflict. Their approach to problems or disagreements is often more subtle

and indirect. Consequently, a mentee from one of these cultures may find it difficult to discuss a problem with candor. Similarly, many Asian and Hispanic families emphasize respecting and obeying adults. For them, disagreeing with an adult, particularly a family member – or in this case a mentor – is forbidden. Conversely, the role and style of communication of some African Americans is much more direct and assertive.

Many Asian cultures have unique courtship and marriage traditions. For example, a Hmong girl typically marries before age 18 and most often is expected to marry a Hmong man of her parents' choosing. She may have no choice about whom she marries.

Ethnic groups can also vary in terms of their beliefs about and orientations toward time. For instance, some Native Americans may follow an inner clock, which they believe to be more natural, rather than adhering to a predetermined agenda or timetable.

Families that have recently arrived in this country often develop distinct reaction patterns. Children of recent immigrants typically react negatively to their parents' insistence that they follow the "old ways." These children are often ashamed of their culture and their traditions. They may even be ashamed of their parents. Mentors can help their mentees celebrate the uniqueness of their culture by showing curiosity and interest in the history and traditions of their mentees' cultures.

Obviously, these are gross stereotypes. They are used here only to demonstrate the range of diversity among different ethnic groups. It is your task as a mentor to learn about ethnic diversity from your mentee, from your observations and from discussions with program staff so that you can better understand the context of your mentee's attitudes and behavior.

Socioeconomic Diversity

Often, mentors come from different socioeconomic backgrounds than their mentees. While one may have grown up on a farm, the other may never have been outside of the city. One may own a house, while the other may not know anyone personally who owns a new car, let alone a house. A mentee's family may move frequently, perhaps every few months, and may not have a telephone. A mentee may have to share a very small apartment with many people. A mentor must learn that many things s/he may have taken for granted are not necessarily common to all. These types of cultural differences are common between mentor and mentee and require time and understanding for an appreciation of their significance. Remember, however, that poverty is color-blind, i.e., many white people are poor, many people of color are not and dysfunction can occur regardless of income, geographic location or level of education. Try not to make assumptions.

It is important to realize that there are psychological effects of chronic poverty. Some mentees may develop a short-term "culture of survival" attitude. A mentor may comment that her mentee, who comes from a very poor family, spends large sums of money on things she considers frivolous (the example she gives is \$100 jeans). Poverty often prevents people from believing that their future holds any promise of getting better. Saving money and investing in the future is a luxury they don't believe they have. Buying a pair of \$100 jeans when you don't have enough food to eat may very well be a function of the "take what you can get while you can get it"

perspective of chronic poverty.

Youth Culture

Many of the characteristics of adolescence are normal, common, developmental traits and consequently don't vary significantly from one generation to the next. For instance, while many adults believe that, in general, teenagers are exceedingly more rebellious than they themselves were as young people, rebellion is a common (and perhaps necessary) ingredient in an adolescent's transition into adulthood. Most of us, as teenagers, dressed very differently—perhaps even outrageously—by our parents' and grandparents' standards. We did things our parents didn't do, spoke differently, etc.

Take the time to remember what it was like to be your mentee's age. If you think about the following questions, you'll find that much of what you went through at that age, your mentee is also going through:

For example, when you were in ____ grade:

- What was a typical day like?
- What was really important to you at that time?
- What was your father/mother like? Did you get along? Were you close?
- Think of your friends. Were friendships always easy or were they sometimes hard?
- In general, did you feel as though adults typically understood you well?

However, it is also important to remember that some things, particularly sociological trends, do change dramatically and result in very different experiences from one generation to the next. There is significantly more alcohol and drug abuse today than there was when you were growing up (although, to be sure, alcohol and drug abuse have always existed); sexually transmitted diseases are more common and more dangerous; crime and violence have drastically increased throughout the country, particularly in urban areas; single-parent families have become more common and greater demands are being placed on all families.

For example, one mentor had a conversation with his mentee about school dances, which, for the mentor, were filled with fond memories of discovering dating and dancing. For the mentee, on the other hand, school dances were dangerous, since gunfire was a common occurrence. Obviously, it is important to be aware of these generational changes in lifestyle and children's coping responses to their life circumstances.

Remember. . .

The following are some suggestions that may help you successfully handle diversity:

- Keep in mind that **you are the adult**—you are the experienced one. Imagine, for a moment, what your mentee might be thinking and feeling. In general, young people of all ages, but particularly teens, believe they are not respected by adults and worry about whether a mentor will like them or think they're stupid. They are coming to you for help and may already feel insecure and embarrassed about the problems in their lives. Thus, it is your responsibility to take the initiative and make the mentee feel more comfortable in the relationship.
- It's also important to remember to **be yourself**. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we try to "relate" to young people, use their slang and be like "one of the gang." Mentees can see through this facade and may find it difficult to trust people who are not true to themselves.
- Furthermore, *you may learn a lot* about another culture, lifestyle or age group, but you will **never be from that group**. Don't over identify with your mentee; s/he realizes you will never know exactly what s/he is feeling or experiencing. A mentee may actually feel invalidated by your insistence that you know where s/he is coming from. There is a big difference between the statements, "I know exactly what you're feeling" and "I think I have a sense of what you're going through." It is helpful to paraphrase what you think your mentee has said or is feeling and to give examples of similar situations that you have experienced.
- If something about your mentee is bothering you, first determine whether the behavior is simply troubling to you because you would do it differently or it is truly an indication of a more seriously troubled youth.

If, in fact, you feel that a troublesome situation is harmful to your mentee or others, you have an obligation to discuss this with your program coordinator. The coordinator will know when and where to refer the young person for professional help. For example, if it is a serious problem — your mentee's abuse of alcohol and/or drugs, for instance — the program coordinator may refer the mentee to an adolescent drug abuse program. It's important to know what you should and should not do or say to your mentee. You are not expected to solve the problem or to be a therapist, but there may be situations where you can help. For instance, your program coordinator might suggest that you actively support your mentee's attendance and participation in support groups, or s/he might suggest that you talk with your mentee about similar situations that you have either experienced or heard about and the ways in which these problems were successfully overcome. Get suggestions from your program coordinator about ways in which you can be helpful and supportive.

Some behavior is not necessarily indicative of a serious problem but can nonetheless be troublesome. For example, being chronically late for appointments, adopting certain styles of dress or excessive swearing may have negative consequences. While your mentee has the right to make decisions about dress, speech and other behavior, you can help by letting him or her know:

- How the behavior makes you feel;
- What judgments others may make about the mentee as a result of the behavior; and
- The reactions and consequences s/he might expect from others.

EXAMPLE: Let's say your mentee usually wears torn jeans and a leather jacket with signs and symbols on the back and is quite proud of his or her unusual hairstyle. Although these outward differences made you uncomfortable at first, you (being the great mentor that you are!) have gotten beyond these "troubling" aspects and realized that, in this case, "different" does not mean "bad."

Now your mentee is looking for a job. Initially, you had decided to say nothing about the importance of appearances during job interviews, but your mentee is having trouble getting a job. You might ask him or her something like:

- Why do you think you didn't get the job?
- What do you think was the interviewer's first impression of you? What do you think gave him or her that impression?
- Do you think the impression you gave is one that is helpful in getting a job? What can you do about this?
- If you were 30 years old and owned a business, would you be hesitant to hire someone who looked and dressed in a way that was completely foreign to you?

You might also discuss ways in which your mentee could keep his or her individuality and identity (both very important needs in adolescence) yet make a more favorable impression. A typical response from a young person might be to refer to the "hypocrisy" and "material values" of the adult culture. Don't mislead or misrepresent the truth — the fact is, like it or not, there are standards and norms in certain situations with which one is expected to comply.

Cultural Reciprocity

An important but often forgotten aspect of cultural diversity is the mutuality of the mentoring relationship, which is what we call cultural reciprocity. This phrase refers to the fact that mentors and mentees alike can benefit from their increased understanding of others who may at first seem unfamiliar. For the mentor, a greater breadth and depth of understanding of others can facilitate better relationships at work, at home and in other social situations. As your mentee begins to trust and know you, s/he will begin to learn about life outside a limited circle of peers and discover new opportunities and ways of doing things: you can be a model for your mentee. The more options we have, the better off we'll be.

Remember: Our lives are enriched by diversity!