

Cross-Cultural Communication Workshops

By Ravi Basi.

According to Charles Darwin "it is not the strongest of the species, nor the most intelligent that survives, but rather the one that is most adaptable to change." Libraries are serving an increasing number of immigrant and multicultural customers and to target this new clientele, effective communication, as well as new skills and strategies, are crucial.

In response to the need for library staff to develop skills and knowledge required for culturally sensitive customer service, BCLA's [Diversity and Multicultural Services Committee](#), with valuable assistance from UBC's [Centre for Intercultural Communication](#), designed a cross-cultural communication workshop in 2007, providing an interactive and informative forum to discuss topics such as:

- Cultural values
- Stereotypes
- Biases and racism
- Problem-solving from real workplace examples
- Communication strategies
- Developing a culturally sensitive organization

The workshop consists of several exercises and activities, including the "Cocktail Party" exercise in which participants pretend to be from various fictional cultures and are instructed to behave, speak, and interact in a particular manner. This role-playing served to raise awareness of diverse communication styles and about our own judgments, assumptions, and reactions toward other people's differences.

In another popular exercise participants were shown a photograph or picture and asked to make up a story about it. They were then told the real story of the picture, which often elicited a hilarious or incredulous response from participants, but was an effective way to illustrate the importance of not jumping to conclusions about people.

The discussion on stereotypes and racism was frank and informal and became particularly interesting when a list of stereotypes about Caucasian people was read out to participants.

For the "brass tacks" part of the workshop, participants were asked to bring with them examples of cross-cultural communication scenarios or issues that they had encountered in their libraries. This exercise resulted in everyone sharing solutions and doing their own problem-solving. A handout with additional communication strategies was given to all participants, as well as practical ideas on making their libraries more culturally sensitive.

The Committee has presented these workshops several times for staff at Surrey Public Library, Fraser Valley Regional Library, UBC Okanagan, Okanagan Regional Library, and SHARE. Feedback has been positive and very encouraging. The Committee can also provide training to any library staff who are interested in delivering these workshops to staff at their own libraries. This train-the-trainer option where staff can do their own in-house workshops, addresses the issue of tight library budgets and has the added benefit of library staff playing a leadership role in responding to change within their own organizations, thus leading to stronger and more successful organizations.

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