



Interaction Institute  
for Social Change

625 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138, USA (617) 234-2750  
PO BOX 969, Belfast BT5 9AN, N. Ireland +44 2890 803296  
[www.interactioninstitute.org](http://www.interactioninstitute.org)

## Values and Guiding Principles for Addressing Issues of Race, Class and Power in Capacity Building Work

Summarized by Cynthia Silva Parker, Interaction Institute for Social Change

This article reflects the thinking of more than sixty capacity builders, consultants, and leaders of nonprofit associations at a “Dialogue on Cultural Competency Relating to Race, Class, Power.” This workshop was held during the conference *The Communities We Serve: Building Capacity for Impact*, co-sponsored by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and the National Council of Nonprofit Associations on July 14-17, 2005 in Chicago, Illinois. The workshop was organized by Makani Themba-Nixon, The Praxis Project; Cynthia Silva Parker, Interaction Institute for Social Change; and Omowale Satterwhite, National Community Development Institute, with support from Brigitte Rouson, Alliance for Nonprofit Management.

The dialogue focused on three questions:

- What values and guiding principles inform your ways of addressing issues of race, class and power in your work?
- What is an example of one of those values or principles in action?
- What open questions do you have about addressing issues of race, class, and power in your work?

The workshop organizers launched the dialogue with a “starter set” of values and guiding principles that strengthen our cultural competence and inform our approaches to issues of race, class and power in our work:

- Do no harm.
- Serve with excellence, mutuality and humility.
- Demonstrate reverence for human dignity.
- Model social justice and address issues of power and privilege.
- Include, collaborate, and ensure effective stakeholder voice.
- Value and celebrate differences.
- Build on assets and appreciate strengths.

The participants then offered their own values, guiding principles and examples of the values and principles in action. Many of their comments were consistent with the “starter set” of values and principles. In considering their responses, two additional principles emerged: be honest; and model and promote learning. Arguably, these principles could be linked to “serve with excellence, mutuality and humility,” but the volume of responses seemed to warrant setting them apart.

This set of values is not meant to be a list of separate, discrete ideas. Rather, they form a web of related concepts that call forth a set of related practices. Taken together, they form a solid foundation for capacity building work that both models and builds cultural competency on the part of ourselves as capacity builders and the people with whom we work.

## **Describing the core values in action**

Below, we begin with brief comments about each value and then list participants' ideas about how they put the values into practice in their work. As you read, we encourage you to consider the connections among the values and the practices that bring them to life in capacity building work.

### **Do no harm.**

The workshop organizers offered this principal as a starting point. As capacity builders, we should strive to add value and avoid doing harm. In practical terms, that could mean recommending that a group consider a different course of action than what they originally requested or declining to do work that has been requested. For instance, a group might ask you to deliver a one-time “diversity” or “conflict resolution” workshop in response to a conflict they have experienced. While honoring the thinking of those making the request, your experience tells you that the group would benefit more from a facilitated conversation about the conflict, and that the group would need to commit to a process, not a single event. Further, you can reasonably anticipate that a one-time event will open up issues that need more time and conversation to heal, and worsen the current climate of tension and difficulty. So, rather than participate in “tearing the scab off and leaving an open wound,” you decline to facilitate the one-time workshop and recommend a different course of action.

The group added the following thought to illustrate this value in action:

- Honor the work and the work will honor you!

### **Serve with excellence, mutuality and humility.**

This value incorporates a number of related ideas about how we, as capacity builders, carry ourselves in our work. The central idea is to do our best work and bring together the most effective array of resources possible, taking our strengths and limitations into account, and remaining open to learning from and alongside those we serve.

The group added the following thoughts to illustrate this value in action:

- Walk the talk. Be the change you want to see in the world, believing and acting in possibility. Lead by example in hopes that others will model. Lead by example and learn from others.
- Always be a person of your word.
- Set and maintain the highest standards in carrying out the work.
- Be aware of my assumptions and sensitive to the fact that I don't know what I don't know; that my experience drives my responses, by listening, receiving before responding, and trying to understand the needs of clients without assumptions.
- Make no assumptions: people have different levels of understanding; people have different experiences due to age, where born and raised, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

- Listen, co-design, co-facilitate, co-monitor a proposal from A to Z.
- Model confident humility.
- In many instances I am a member of the community an organization serves. In this sense, I try to bring the best of what I have to offer to a partnership. I recognize mutual goals and existing expertise and look for ways that I can make a contribution.
- You can't do this kind of work alone; work in mixed race/mixed gender teams.

### **Be honest.**

The participants in the workshop added several comments about honesty, which could be considered an extension of the value of serving with excellence, mutuality and humility. We have chosen to set these comments apart because they create a foundation for practicing many of the values discussed during the workshop.

- Be honest with myself, acknowledge my own complexity. There is no need to pretend that I am other than who I am. But also be honest about my confusion. Sometimes, I just don't know everything about myself. So I need to join my honesty with curiosity.
- Be honest with others, be authentic, name stuff even when I do not have an answer.
- Demonstrate honesty and integrity. Tell the truth in a nice way whenever appropriate and respect others

### **Model and promote learning.**

In the context of the conversation about serving with mutuality, workshop participants emphasized the importance of engaging in our capacity building work as learners rather than as “experts who know.” It is important for us continually to seek insights, engage in different ways of understanding, and develop skills that will enable us to serve with excellence. Our clients, communities and the challenges they face are forever changing and we must learn and grow if we are to continue to serve. Modeling the role and perspective of a learner also creates opportunities for the people with whom we work to see in every experience, however successful or challenging, an opportunity for learning rather than blame-finding. Further, it models the principle of humility when we enter into engagements fully prepared to learn from the people we are serving. When we open up to learning from many sources, we also validate a variety of “ways of knowing” to place the wisdom that comes from lived experience, informal observation and intergenerational transmission of traditions alongside knowledge that comes from “credentialed” sources like research or academic studies.

Participants added many comments to illustrate this value in action:

- I value that everyone has a story to share that contributes to creating the complex picture of “what is.” It's the complexity of multiple realities in a group that allow them to find and create what is needed. I support clients in building as much of these complex, multiple realities as possible – stretching/pushing them to hear and consider more and then using that knowledge to develop dynamic strategies.
- Ask for their input. Find out who they are, what is important to them.
- Every day is a learning moment. Promote continual learning.
- Initiate my own learning about difference-cultures.
- Understand that I always have much to learn from everyone I encounter, and that my *assumptions* are often based on incomplete info. Check them out!
  - Remind self to approach every situation as a learner.

- Pay attention to my internal voice – Identifying assumptions –“climbing down my ladder.”
- Get more information.
- Inquiry and discovery *vs.* PERFECTION
  - Encourage risk taking by sharing lessons from “glorious successes” and “glorious failures” as a team
  - Story sharing, structured dialogue
  - I have a lot to learn, always
  - There’s always another way to see something
- Understanding where my co-workers, customers, board members are coming from, not jumping to conclusions, getting to know those I work with beyond just the co-worker level
- Put a premium on listening and learning and challenging myself as well as clients/colleagues to stretch.
- Build in time for self-reflection and learning along with other colleagues and practitioners.

### **Demonstrate reverence for human dignity.**

For the workshop organizers, this value goes deeper than simply acknowledging that people are different or celebrating those differences by lifting up cultural traditions or unique points of view. It requires us, as capacity builders, to make every decision with the deliberate intention of preserving the dignity of each person. This includes people who are present in a given moment, people with whom the people who are present may be at odds or in conflict, and people who might be affected by or the target of their activities, projects or interventions. We might need to take seemingly small actions, like intervening when humor is used to put down an individual or group (whether that person or group is present or absent). We might need to ensure that people who will be affected by a decision are involved in the decision making process. It might also include modeling, facilitating, or coaching others toward more respectful ways of interacting. And, it might require us to focus a group’s attention on ways in which the systems, structures or procedures within an organization violate the dignity of some people and supporting them as they advocate and plan for alternatives

The group’s ideas about putting this value into practice included:

- Everyone has something to offer no matter who they are. Listen and always involve others, asking for input. It’s an easy question to ask “What do you think?”
- Everyone has a gift and each person’s opinion should be valued; set aside titles, degrees, etc. and use first names.
- Practice open and compassionate listening. Also, look for the LOVE, caring connections that unite us. Allow time for personal reflection and sharing. Do not preach but create space for people to contribute.
- Practice compassion. Respect that people are in different places around their own journey and analysis of race, class, power and privilege when working with white anti-racist learning groups and model compassion instead of judgment.
- Practice vulnerability, listening, depth, and analogy to get *inside* the person or situation and find commonality.
- Maintain my humanity in this work, and ensure that when folks leave the room their humanity is intact by ensuring everyone is heard, actively listen, “carefronting” and

not “confronting” issues as they come up, and speaking to folks in a manner that ensures they feel ok.

### **Model social justice and address issues of power and privilege.**

The workshop organizers offered the perspective that as capacity builders, addressing issues of race, class and power in our capacity building work requires conscious attention. Power dynamics cannot be changed if they are not examined, acknowledged or understood. Prejudice, discrimination and oppression cannot be stopped without directly paying attention to the ways that race, class and other forms of identity affect the distribution of power, privileges and challenges in a society, community or organization. As capacity builders, we can model a commitment to social justice by enabling the groups with which we work to examine these issues and develop creative, effective responses. In addition, we can use ourselves as tools and continually explore the ways in which our own access to power and privilege affects our interactions with the groups we serve.

The workshop participants offered examples of how they put this value into practice, including:

- Be aware of my privilege and power and work to level it and build real equity in the group by:
  - Designing participatory, facilitative processes
  - Asking for *vs.* giving answers and directions
  - Building trust and safety before sharing my experience and knowledge
  - Working to overcome guilt and shame in productive, liberating ways
- I work in the literacy field and the principle of educational equity is a guiding principle. In building literacy plans in large urban areas it is difficult to implement change although there is general recognition of the issue. We do a power analysis with a simple graphic format and try to identify issues that could be impacted by change strategies. It is difficult, frustrating and challenging.
- Acknowledge that I, and most people I work with, both have privilege and have faced oppression. Be hypersensitive to privilege and power when I have it and when I don't. Everyone and every organization has a mix and can change.
- I'm *never* just me. I always represent something to someone and it's hard to know what unless we talk about it.
- Share power, create equal access, and model lateral leadership by:
  - Implementing ideas of colleagues and let them lead process
  - Introducing “have nots” to “haves” and moving out of the way unless needed
    - Understanding that everyone needs to be heard
- Look to measure impact. Understand that, in the final analysis, we are here to change things. Develop benchmarks and measures. Articulate a change model that goes beyond “deliverables” to addressing how we have changed things for the better.

### **Include, collaborate, and ensure effective stakeholder voice.**

The workshop organizers made a strong case for collaboration as a foundation for effective work around issues of race, class and power. Without a commitment to practices such as participatory decision making, transparency of information, collective learning, and broad-based stakeholder engagement, it is difficult to bring to life a full-fledged commitment to social justice and equitable outcomes.

Workshop participants pointed out several practical ways in which this value plays out in their work.

- Design participatory process in all ways. Make equal access to everybody's voice and ideas. Set agendas, initiatives, programs, etc. based on people's needs and interests.
- Listening is the best beginning to solving every problem. We build in systemic ways of listening: focus groups, planning sessions, regular phone check-ins as a structured part of our internal evaluation processes.
- Address power imbalance and create space for voices to be heard; hold space where people who are marginalized can speak and voice their experience and perspective
- Foster power-promoting participatory democracy and the involvement of each individual in the life and direction of the organization or association as a leader, by:
  - Focusing on leadership development within my own organization and with the organizations we serve
  - Focusing on individual strengths with the belief that each person will give and contribute in different ways.
  - Continuing to learn to be a better listener

### **Value and celebrate differences.**

Although we said earlier that demonstrating reverence for human dignity goes deeper than valuing and celebrating differences, the workshop organizers also pointed to the importance of this deceptively simple principle. It's simple to notice the differences and lift up that which is beautiful, interesting or unique about particular groups of people. At the same time, the workshop organizers pointed out the danger of settling for a "group of the month" approach that focuses exclusively on holidays and cultural celebrations. Rather, we suggest challenging the groups with which we work to explore how those different perspectives, experiences and traditions influence the way individuals assess work-related or community-related situations, frame the relevance of issues, and generate potential strategies and actions.

Workshop participants offered specific ways in which they bring this value to life in their work.

- Recognize that we all are different. Celebrate and embrace those differences. Don't look at the differences as obstacles, but rather as possible solutions.
- Look for the unique qualities and perspectives each person brings to the group, as well as the tangible resources and talents they represent.
- Consider how programs are inclusive of cultures; no "one size fits all" solutions. However, also look for possible similarities that can be shared across groups.
- Understand the historical context and its relevance for individuals.
- Come to each moment and each person as unique.
- Encourage dialogue. Ask and listen.

### **Build on assets and appreciate strengths.**

In keeping with a long-standing tradition in community work and capacity building, the workshop organizers emphasized the importance of taking an asset-based approach. While this is important to capacity building work in general, it is particularly important as we support people to build bridges across racial, class or other differences in a community or within an organization.

Workshop participants offered a few comments about how they bring this value to life in their practices.

- Strength-based attributes, qualities and core values can be embodied in group work. Serve as a resource to help increase knowledge and skills to inform practices (my practice and others).
- Explore strategic ways that organizations, institutions and individuals can develop policies and practices that help them integrate cultural competence into what they do. Implement systems of accountability.

As you can see, each of these values hints at several of the others. Consider the links, for instance, between mutuality, humility and learning, or between valuing differences, revering human dignity, and fostering collaboration. The web of values offered during this dialogue suggests a set of practices and competencies that enable us to approach issues of race, class and power in our capacity building work.

## **Building a Practitioner’s Learning Agenda**

The session ended with gathering and acknowledging participants’ questions about how to continue engaging the issues of race, class and power in their capacity building work. The questions centered on three broad issues:

- How can we deepen our understanding of cultural competence and its links to capacity building?
- How can we deepen our understanding of our own identity and cultural location and their relevance to capacity building work?
- How can we engage with and apply cultural competence at the organizational and systems levels?

The detailed questions surrounding each issue follow.

## **Deepening understanding of cultural competence and its links to capacity building**

Some participants and other colleagues in the capacity building field experience a disconnect between cultural competency and capacity building. Some believe it is possible to engage in “good” capacity building work without considering issues of race, class and power, while others challenge that claim. Some wonder how to address these issues in situations where the people with whom we are working have not identified the issues specifically. Yet others acknowledge the importance of cultural competency and wonder about how to continue their learning journey. Specific practitioner questions included:

- How do you define cultural competency *in* capacity building?
- I’m still struggling to understand what people mean about “cultural competence.” It is hard to understand most of the lingo people use to describe it. It will be easy for a lot of us to simplify the terminology so everybody is clear what is what we’re talking about.
- Can anyone ever really be culturally competent with so many cultures around?
- How do we really understand power and changing power relations. In the group—it came up.

- How do we practice a healthy inclusiveness that undermines racism without reinscribing the very fallacy (that outside circumstances define, ultimately, an irreconcilable difference) which has given rise to the problem?
- How do we undermine the categorization of groups (and all the practical consequences thereof) when our scientific and economic cultures base conclusions and practice on insisting distinctions are source of truth/value/fundamental human experience?
- What will it take to be included in as much of this exploration as possible? I'm in!
- Can I be involved in your follow up?
- I would love to be in touch to learn more about these issues and strategies—working with cultural diversity, especially with race and class, has been a challenge and even though I've written “guidelines” on this I'm still largely learning, questioning, experimenting.

### **Understanding our own identity and cultural location**

Another set of questions revolved around self-awareness and the impact of our own identities on our work as capacity builders.

- How do we bring in our own stories?
- How are we transparent about our privilege, etc.?
- Coming from a perspective emphasizing the value of interior reality (soul-spiritual values), the universality of human experiencing, and desire for connection, and very much deliberately practicing that, I respond to being called on the carpet about inclusiveness practices by someone who doesn't know me, only my outside, by withdrawing, feeling tempted to behave in kind. And of course, habits of body, time, space, cultural must have inscribed similar assumptions in my psyche. But it starts feeling like we're in a futile house of mirrors, cross-projecting.

### **Engaging and applying cultural competence at the organizational and systems levels**

Finally, a set of questions emerged about how to deepen our capacity to apply insights about culture, identity and power beyond the levels of personal awareness and interpersonal interactions. Practitioner questions included:

- How do we mobilize to educate and move systems to become more responsive and inclusive?
- How can we integrate cultural competence into decision making processes at organizational and institutional level?
- How can we instill and make cultural competence in workplaces where managers don't see the value of cultural competence stuff and only focus on the superficial level of diversity?
- How can we fund organizational efforts to become more inclusive?
- How can we address issues of privilege without creating gulfs that can't be bridged? How can we reduce blame and guilt in these discussions, while still being real?
- How do you build culturally competent nonprofits and communities of practice?
- How can we create value for enhancing cultural competence in institutions and organizations and increase funding for it?
- How can we build educational equity best practices to share with community coalitions?

- We provide TA funding for diversity training in our coalitions but have not developed “what next” strategies for life long learning coalitions. Where are the good examples of systems change strategies that we can learn?

## **Framing a learning agenda for practitioners**

The workshop organizers closed by introducing a framework for developing an agenda for ongoing learning and development as practitioners. Participants were invited to recognize that our learning should be at least two dimensional.

On one dimension, we can focus our learning on different “targets of intervention.”<sup>1</sup> Developing and deepening cultural competence will require different capacity building strategies, activities and skills depending on whether you are focusing your interventions on individuals, organizations, communities, systems or entire fields. Further, honing one’s skills as a capacity builder also involves making strategic choices about how to combine activities focused at multiple targets of intervention in a given project or initiative.

On another dimension, we can focus our learning on different levels of theory,<sup>2</sup> including:

- Basic concepts (e.g., What is cultural competence?)
- Strategies for change (e.g., How can cultural competence be developed or cultivated? How can the negative effects of the absence of cultural competence be mitigated or eliminated?)
- Essential skills (e.g., What skills must I master if I’m going to help cultivate cultural competence in my capacity building work?)
- Strategies for learning and development (e.g., How can I develop and deepen my mastery over those skills?)

Participants were encouraged to consider their strengths and growing edges on both dimensions.

## **Closing Observations**

Many of the participants’ comments about values and guiding principles proceeded from genuine care and concern about individual people – concern that could be demonstrated in many different ways. Clearly, approaches to addressing issues of race, class, and power must focus on the people involved, honor their human dignity and create processes and norms that support full, broad-based participation. These principles and values are essential for the work of capacity building in a manner that addresses differences of race, class and power. Moreover, since so much of the work involves helping rooms full of people find ways to listen to one another, learn from one another’s perspectives and determine how to move forward together in the face of differences, a focus on listening, interpersonal interactions and group dynamics is warranted.

At the same time, relatively few people’s comments focused on the issues of difference and power at the level of organizations, institutions or systems. This might be explained in part by the way we asked the question. Still, results are consistent with a pattern that the workshop organizers have observed in the field as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The targets of intervention were introduced by the National Community Development Institute.

<sup>2</sup> The levels of theory were introduced by Interaction Institute for Social Change, building on the work of David Kantor and his Action Theory.

As you read in the “open questions” section, participants highlighted several areas for further inquiry, including: inclusiveness, systems change, cultural competence and privilege. As we continue to explore the issues of race, class and power in our capacity building work, we would do well to pay particular attention to structural, systemic and organizational analyses and approaches, in addition to the more interpersonal relationships, small group dynamics and norm setting activities that rightly capture much of our attention.

## Workshop participants, partial listing

This is an alphabetical listing of the participants who offered their names along with written input at the end of the workshop.

Jacquetta Al-Mubaslat, Columbus Medical Association Foundation  
Beth Applegate, Applegate Consulting Group  
Vickie Asakura, Nonprofit Assistance Center-Seattle  
Sharon G. Bailey, Center for Nonprofit Management-Dallas  
Margaret Doughty, Literacy USA  
Yolanda Nunn Gorman, Ph.D., Brilliance Strategies, Inc.  
Steve Graham, Community Resource Center  
Gita Gulati-Partee, Open Source Leadership Strategies, Inc.  
Lisa Hasegawa, National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development  
Hedy Helsell, Center for Nonprofit Management  
Ayesha Lane, Third Sector New England  
Mark Leach, Management Assistance Group  
Joyce Mallory, Nonprofit Center of Milwaukee  
Virginia Martinez, University of Illinois of Chicago, International Center for Health Leadership Development  
Monika Moss, MKM Management Consulting  
Cynthia Silva Parker, Interaction Institute for Social Change  
Heba Nimr, PILA-Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action  
Deborah E. Reid, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies  
Janice Robinson, United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta  
Jesus Rodriguez, Non Profit Assistance Center-Seattle  
Luz Rodriguez, Center for the Support of Immigrant Organizing  
Beth Rosenthal, Collaboration and Change  
Brigette Rouson, Alliance for Nonprofit Management  
Omowale Satterwhite, National Community Development Institute  
Patricia Talton/Annie Jones-Barr, Integrity Source  
Makani Themba-Nixon, The Praxis Project  
Bruce Truitt, Interaction Institute for Social Change  
Annie Yeh, Leader to Leader Institute