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CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN CONSENSUS ORGANIZING

In this chapter, you will learn:

- ◆ The importance of your own history.
- ◆ How to use differences to gain perspective.
- ◆ How to bring people together using both their differences and their similarities.

In consensus organizing, you work with a large number of very different people. You have the opportunity to see how differences in race, age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation cut across consciousness. Sometimes these differences can divide us like thin paper shredded on a windy day. We live in very different worlds and very divided times. Some people prey on any difference they can find to put wedges between us, making our separateness feel natural, inevitable, and even sometimes desirable. Many times after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, conservatives portrayed liberals as “pro-terrorist.” Liberals were

portrayed as so soft that they opposed efforts to protect the United States from attack. Being kept apart is neither natural nor inevitable. It is unnatural. As humans, deep inside, we yearn to come together. This desire is what consensus organizers uncover. We try to make it blossom and grow. We have many forces to battle. Just remember that the desire to come together is strong. Those forces attempting to pull us apart do so against our deeply held preferences as social animals. We want to be part of a group and the more people who join us the stronger we become. That is our natural goal.

Let's take a look at politics. Does a politician have a vested interest in all of us coming together to do something collectively? Absolutely not. The politician wants 50.1 percent of us to come together to vote for the politician. Politicians will do whatever effectively leads to their coalition of 50.1 percent. Guess what that means? It means they try to divide us. Through division, they attempt to reach their goal.

Sometimes politicians use division to achieve their goals.

Let's say I decide to run for political office ("I like Eich"). I suddenly look at the world in a way that needs to see the value in making me U.S. Congressman Eichler. If I consider taking a stance in support of legislation that allows prayer in public schools, I know that civil libertarians won't like me, many non-Christians won't like me, and atheists won't like me. If, however, 50.1 percent now *do* like me, I don't care about any divisions I have deepened. With polling techniques and focus groups now so advanced and accurate, I can find that 50.1 percent very quickly. It doesn't even matter what I think about the issue, I just want to reach that magic 50.1 percent of the vote.

Take the law profession. When was the last time you saw a trial lawyer say, "Judge, both sides are saying some things that are similar and I think the truth is that they are both partly correct." I think you are probably more likely to hear, "My client is the reincarnation of Mother Teresa. Your client is the second coming of Attila the Hun." In other words, lawyers take adversarial relationships and exacerbate divisions that already exist. They are paid well for their efforts. No wonder that law students practice creating "us" and "them" situations. They learn to see differences and not similarities.

How about our educational system? Do we have equal schools and equally successful students and equally compensated teachers and administrators? Do we even try to reach the goal of equal education? We might

have the rhetoric, but we don't commit the resources. Instead of seeing all young people, all parents, all teachers as having the same goals, we divide into separate camps. We dwell on our differences. We try to place blame. Although I teach college students, you can bet my "colleagues" at Yale and Princeton perceive very little in common with me. Because I teach students from mostly modest backgrounds at a public university, I am not even expected to have the same credentials and abilities as my Ivy League pals. Instead, we all focus on our differences; how our situations are so far apart.

Our society divides us and does so quite comfortably. Sometimes these divisions appear while attempting to help others. Sound contradictory? Not really. Let's analyze the structure of cultural competency. It's good that we are sensitive to differences in each of us that have been shaped by our experiences, right? It's also good that we understand how our ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation shape us, right? Of course. We need to understand our own history and roots so we can have a higher awareness of how our attitudes toward one another have been shaped. We must become very self-aware so we can analyze how racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism can creep into our attitudes toward others. Could it be, though, that the more sensitive and aware we are of our differences, the less likely we are to see our equally evident similarities? Consensus organizers have to do two analyses. We have to work just as hard as all caring people to become culturally aware and sensitive to the differences that exist and, at the same time, we have to look hard for similarities that will lead to new partnerships, mutual self-interest, and social change.

A consensus organizer must be culturally aware and sensitive to differences while also looking hard for similarities.

For the next few minutes, pretend you are a kid again. Think of it in terms of two steps. Take out all your building blocks from your toy chest. Look at each different block. They have different sizes and colors. Picture yourself spreading all the blocks out on the floor. Put each block in your hand. See and feel the differences from block to block. That's the first step you do when you try to relate to people. You need to know and understand differences. As a kid, you wanted to have a lot of blocks because each had value because they were different. If they all were exactly the same, it would have limited what you could build. What you could build would have been dull, boring, and repetitious. Consensus organizers then take a crucial second step. We

take those different blocks and use the differences to build something more interesting, stronger, and more long lasting. We take the second step of using the differences to create something that benefits us all (see Figure 5.1). Similarities and differences are of equal importance.

Step 1: Learn about your own history.

Step 2: Learn to use differences to work together, while deepening similarities.

Figure 5.1 Cultural Competency in Consensus Organizing

Let's talk about both of these steps so you can see the process clearly. In the first step, you learn about your own history—a vital process before you can lay claim to be able to do anything else. Often, people skip this beginning point. Why do you suppose many skip it? I think people like to see themselves as typical, normal, and middle-of-the-road. They define the middle and they choose the road. They then compare everyone else to themselves. If they are similar to you, they are normal. The less similar to you they are, the more abnormal they seem. Let me give you a real example. I was raised as a Catholic and attended Catholic school. In grade school, we learned that when we entered the church for any reason (for mass, for private prayer, to find the janitor, or to use the bathroom), we were to be absolutely quiet. If we had some life or death reason to talk, it had better be in the lowest possible whisper. I remember thinking that if an elderly neighbor had a heart attack in church, he or she would have to die quietly. Our teachers drilled into our pea brains that church was a very holy place and that silence was a sign of respect and reverence. Well, after having this repeated over and over, even I eventually “got with the program.” When, as an adult, I go into church, I keep my trap shut. Many years after Catholic school, I fell in love with a terrific Jewish woman and I had the common sense and good fortune to marry. She is religious, so out of respect for her, I attended synagogue services. Prior to meeting her, I had never entered a temple. So there I was, entering for the first time, sweating, nervous, yarmulke on my head, feeling as though I had the letters C-a-t-h-o-l-i-c stenciled on my sweater. As we walked down the center aisle, the first thing that hit me was the noise. People were talking. Actually it was a little more like shouting. They blurted out deeply religious stuff like, “Did you get a deal on that hotel in Florida?” and “Oy, that deli's pastrami was so lean!” I was shocked. Didn't these people know that there was a religious service about

to start? Didn't they feel they were in the house of the Lord? What was wrong with them? Of course it was a very short step for me to feel that they were disrespectful. I remember that this bothered me a lot. It bothered me enough that I didn't want to share with my wife how I felt. I didn't think she would agree with me. Well, luckily I kept analyzing my feelings. I didn't want to be "politically correct" and act like it didn't bother me. I slowly remembered my own upbringing. Was it always wrong to talk inside any house of worship? More interesting, was it always respectful to be quiet? What about how my uncle always fell asleep when the priests talked? He was pretty quiet. The next time I returned to the temple, I met many people whom I classified as deeply religious even though they yakked and yakked before the service. Many of these people led devout, exemplary lives. I finally began to understand. I wanted to find people who respected their religion (good) but I had been using the wrong measurement (bad). I first had to understand my own culture before I could have insight into another.

Once we begin to understand our own history, we should begin to relate to everyone else we meet with respect, warmth, concern, empathy, genuine interest, and curiosity. We do not initially need knowledge. That would come later.

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People will be most suspicious of you when you are a stranger. Their guard will be up. As you show your true self in a nondefensive, comfortable manner and you show real interest in the person you are talking to, you start to feel the progress. You are increasing the chances for a real discussion to take place. You do not have to feel pressure to do everything correctly. Rather, the challenge is to have a genuine interest and make a genuine effort to understand.

Have you ever traveled overseas and attempted to speak a language other than your own? Almost always your effort will be appreciated rather than your competency. You are appreciated because you are trying to do something they can already do. In gaining cultural competency, you are appreciated because you are showing value in others. We show genuine interest in learning and understanding our true selves. We then begin to understand others. Through exposure and opportunity, we gradually gain insight. Try to be comfortable with the knowledge that there is much to learn. Never, ever, fake understanding. It's almost always detectable and very unfair to others. Remember, people like to enlighten or teach others about themselves. The

interest just has to be genuine. Cultural competence should not be measured by correct answers on a scantron sheet (that is, those answer sheets used for standardized tests like the SAT and GRE). It should be an interesting challenge we face throughout our entire lives.

For consensus organizers, the second step in this two-step process is crucial. As we gradually learn how and why people are different, we begin the second step. We now show that despite these differences, in fact *because* of these differences, we are going to work together successfully. Many times advocates of cultural competency stop at the point of gaining understanding. Wouldn't it be much better to use our differences to achieve collective benefit? That's our goal (see Figure 5.1).

Consensus organizers create a series of relationships that lead to intervention and program design. Our role is to show that our differences help us achieve results. If all the participants were similar, we would lose the different perspectives, skills, outlooks, and styles necessary to create change. Your effort would be one-dimensional. It would probably fail. By blending differences, you have more talent, more thinking, and more creativity.

By using our differences, we gain additional perspectives, skills, outlooks, and styles necessary to create change.

Consensus organizers create opportunities for double benefits. First, people benefit from their differences by understanding them, appreciating them, and putting them to good use. Second, as we gain insight into differences we find strange similarities we never saw before. Let's go back to the synagogue. I learned I appreciated the concept of devotion. I learned that I respected devout people. I learned that silence is one form of devotion. I learned, however, that it is not the only measurement. With this new realization, that there is a broader measurement, I saw there were more devout people around than I previously had thought. That news made me happier. I used to have one measurement—silence in a house of worship. See how I was limiting myself? In the temple, people conversed loudly on secular topics. But I now saw that they showed devotion in the way they led their lives. The differences lead to the similarities. This is a very profound thought. We live in a society that refuses to do the "two step." We take one step, or none at all. We do not usually make much progress in gaining cultural competency. We almost always do not take the "two steps."

Think of it. Maybe you have labeled people as enemies for all the wrong reasons. In my case, Jewish people yelling in the temple made me

uncomfortable. It made me feel that I was surrounded by disrespectful people. It made me want to leave and be surrounded by people “like me.” I wanted the comfort of familiarity. To achieve true cultural competency we have to expand our experiences with others. We have to look in strange places, under rocks, and behind closed doors. We have to search out differences. These differences are what the consensus organizers use to make blends. Most important, we see that these differences, once they are understood, are the glue that will hold us all together.

Sometimes, after analyzing differences between oneself and others, we see the differences as insurmountable and use them as a rationale for inaction. We say, “Now that I see how different the resident, or client is from me, how can I even begin to understand them?” When we do this, the awareness of differences can set us back rather than take us forward. Our sensitivity can lead us to conclude that we can’t help. Talk about ironic!

It is crucial that we understand cultural differences. As we begin to understand, it puts us in the position to be able to take action more effectively. All organizers know that to be successful, we must bring different people with different skills and perspectives together. As our understanding of differences increases, so does our obligation to take action to help improve the lives of others.

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Never use increased understanding, awareness, and sensitivity as an excuse for inaction. Rather, try to think of these realizations as an opportunity you have created for yourself and others. Remember, people are more successful when moving toward something than they are when moving away from something. Consensus organizers operating from a “strengths” perspective put divergent people together around a specific issue. We create change by using each person’s gifts and talents in helpful ways.

So as forces in our society divide us, they zero in on our misunderstandings and our lack of familiarity with one another. They look for anything that aggravates us and tell us our aggravation is justified. We all suffer together as a result. The rich are all lazy. The poor are all lazy. The blacks are all lazy. The whites are all lazy. The immigrants are all lazy. It never ends. Consensus organizers try to go in the opposite direction. We create real opportunities for disparate people to come together through mutual

self-interest and benefit from relationships with one another. As parties work together toward a common goal, they progress toward cultural competency. This is done through achieving mutual goals, not by attending seminars, memorizing steps, or simulated exercises. People begin to see that through differences can come strength. Differences are embraced and celebrated. Most significant, people learn that beyond these real differences, lie many, many more similarities than we ever felt were possible.

Imagine that you have brought together 20 diverse volunteers who all would like to start a day care center in their neighborhood. In this group, you have a person who tends to go on and on when making a point, another who is abrupt and likes to get to the bottom line quickly, and another who is always passionate and emotional. The participants also have different ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. To get the day care center off the ground, you also have to build positive relationships with bureaucrats, philanthropists, and parents needing day care. One volunteer may match up better in one situation, and another volunteer better in another situation. As a result, each volunteer sees that differences help achieve success toward a mutual goal. As the volunteers see that they benefit from their differences, they begin to see their similarities as well. They see that their similarities outnumber their real differences. The day care center opens and is a huge success.

OK, on paper this all sounds sensible. But what does this really look like out in our big, messy world? Well, partner, saddle up your pony. We are going deep into the heart of a big state, y'all. Let's head south to Houston, Texas.

THAT'S A TEXAS GRAPEFRUIT

I felt good about the work the development team had done in the Mon Valley in Pennsylvania. The technical assistance providers actually taught all of the volunteers the skills that they had built. I saw their confidence increase as they learned the basics of real estate and business development. The community organizers were effective even though they did not have previous experience. Their enthusiasm, effort, and genuineness had carried the day. As the volunteers stepped forward and took responsibility, as the external resources, such as foundations, corporations, and government, played key partnership roles, I wondered whether these patterns could be duplicated in other parts of the country.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a well respected financial and technical assistance national intermediary, was one of the external

resources that had helped develop the Mon Valley. By the mid-1980s, they had expanded their national program and were involved in more than 20 cities. In most instances, they raised money from local banks and large employers and then matched it with money they received from national sources, such as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. They then established a local program that provided loans, grants, and technical advice to neighborhood development corporations.

I was interested in trying out the model in another location, away from the industrial areas of Buffalo and Pittsburgh. I flew to New York City and met with LISC officials. They explained that they had a handful of cities where demand for their services had not been as great as expected. This presented a serious problem for them because the local funders were expecting to see new businesses, houses, and apartments in areas of their cities where the need was evident. If there were no organized neighbors wanting to become developers, they were in trouble. Perhaps a new grassroots effort to create demand for their services was needed. I claimed that I had some experience in doing that. I left the Allegheny conference on good terms. I saw Dave Bergholz one last time in his office. He was warm, funny, and supportive. LISC gave me a one-way plane ticket to Houston, Texas.

Have you ever been to Houston? It's a pretty big city. Everything is pretty big. A glass of iced tea holds a quart. The city limits claim more square miles than entire New England states. Houston has an annual rodeo that lasts almost two weeks. The first night I arrived, I stayed at a bed and breakfast in the city. In the morning, the hostess served me a grapefruit and I said, "Ma'am, that's a very good breakfast and this grapefruit is huge." She broke out in a broad smile, brimming with pride, and said, "Son, that's a Texas grapefruit!" That same day it rained a bit. The weather service routinely announced that the total 24-hour rainfall amount was 10.79 inches. Everybody went about his or her business as if it was just a steady drizzle. My first week there, I purchased a small electronic pocket address book and calendar. I put it in my suit coat pocket and walked outside. It stopped working. I took it back to the electronic store and spoke with the manager. He looked at me like I was an idiot and scolded me, saying "You took this outside, where it wasn't air-conditioned, didn't you?" I sheepishly admitted the crime. He screamed, "You can't do that, son. It melted!" Did I mention Houston gets a tad hot and humid? I had to get used to it. I began to be able to tell the difference between a 96-degree day and a 98-degree day. The oil executives liked to tell stories about how in the 1940s their companies used to offer "combat pay," extra money to employees willing to move their families to one of two cities, Calcutta, India, or Houston, Texas.

LISC's local corporate partner in Houston was a loose equivalent to the Allegheny Conference. It had a board composed of the leadership of all the major Houston companies. I felt at home speaking to them. They looked at the poor and the communities they lived in as places with some hope and potential, but most past and current programs aiming to help were misguided, and a great deal of money was spent with little result. Even though Houston businesses were different from Pittsburgh businesses, it seemed their outlooks were surprisingly similar. I was glad to see my experience with other corporate leaders brought some credibility, even down in Texas. I learned that Houston was not Dallas. I sprinkled my standard introductory speech to them with lines like, "The first day I moved to your fine city, it rained 10.79 inches. I called a friend back home, and he said, 'Mike, you've been living in Texas less than 24 hours and you're already exaggerating.'" I love some of Houston's phrases. "That guy thinks you hung the moon" (that's good), "That other guy thinks you are all hat and no cattle" (that's bad).

At the neighborhood level, I could walk miles and miles and only hear Spanish spoken. There was Spanish on the billboards, and Spanish in the shops. I had never experienced that before. The poverty in some of these neighborhoods was devastating. In the old 4th Ward, hundreds of shotgun shacks still stood, occupied with real living families. The houses are referred to as shotgun shacks because you could open the back door and see the front door (no hallways, little privacy, and very small rooms) and fire a shot through the whole house, through one door and then right out the other. I had only seen pictures of scenes like this, and they always seemed to be in rural areas, not in the shadows of downtown skyscrapers. Some social workers estimated the homeless population at 25,000 people. These were the unfortunate souls who were unable to live in a shotgun shack. On one occasion, while waiting for the bus, a pickup truck sped by, and three guys in cowboy hats yelled, "Yee haw!" Houston was not the Mon Valley, but I made it my new home. I got my library card and registered to vote. My precinct had its residents practice democracy on Election Day by voting in a Mexican restaurant. The clerk found my name on the registration list under a jalapeño pepper.

LET'S ROAST THE GOAT

To be effective in Houston, I knew I had to understand the social context and political culture. I read both local newspapers daily. I listened to local radio and watched the local television news. I had to do everything I could to absorb the local scene, understand the people, and relate to their psyches.

To be successful, I had to understand the social context and the political culture.

Those first few months there, before even attempting to hire organizers, I noticed a number of startling differences in attitude, outlook, and behavior from what I was used to. I had to think through these differences and let them sink in. From this process, I shaped my five commandments of Houston. Commandment one, don't trust the police. Houston was the first place I lived in where the majority of residents feared the police. I'm talking about a majority of the law-abiding citizens. In my neighborhood in Houston, it was not uncommon to see people purposely crossing the street when they saw a police officer. It seemed that "suspects" had to be shot to be restrained more often than in any other metropolitan area. Commandment two, newer is better. In Buffalo and Pittsburgh, older was better. In those cities, it was assumed that old things stood the test of time, whereas new things were untested and not a sure thing. In Houston, it was always the new idea, new product, new car, and new house that got the attention and admiration. Commandment three, divide and conquer. With a multitude of minority groups and ethnicities, whites kept power by aligning themselves in one group, while freezing out others, to create a majority and keep the power. This caused a very high degree of mistrust and division among racial and ethnic groups within the neighborhoods. Commandment four, bigger is better; smaller is worse. With this fascination with size, would it be difficult to convince people that a small housing or economic development project would be beneficial? Commandment five, bravado is a sign of strength. Whenever I heard anyone talking "big," either at the neighborhood or corporate level, about all the wonderful things they were going to do, my white, ethnic, Northeastern, blue-collar roots took over and I thought "This guy's talking out of his ass." I was used to everyone around me drawing the same types of conclusion as I did. In Houston, everyone admires this bravado type of person. He or she is seen as confident, successful, and a visionary. Years later, Enron did not surprise me in the least. There was little if any stigma attached to failure. The key measurement was not failure but your response to it. The idea was to talk even bigger after failure, proving your tenacity and spunk. Bankruptcy, foreclosure, and loss were admired if they were followed with resiliency.

Constant attempts to understand and adjust to these commandments kept me on edge. The key was not to get people to see these issues as I did, nor was the key to get them to think differently. Rather, the key was to adopt an organizing method to match their attitudes. I knew that adjustments had to be made, but it was not easy or natural. I had to find the organizers by

starting to build a local network of contacts. I found three that I thought had potential. One contact was found through her activity as a mother and volunteer in the public school system. Another contact was found through working on a community beautification project. The last contact was found as an active student at the University of Houston school of social work. I thought his talent had the potential to match the Mon Valley staff. The professional technical assistance providers were, however, much harder to assemble. I was very put off by the big talk, fast results personalities. Finally, we assembled the team. The organizers were trained to analyze the Houston low-income communities and select the six that had the greatest chance for success. The volunteers began to be recruited; they had pride in their communities and they were willing to work hard and learn. The corporate leaders were willing to support their efforts. One group in a predominately Latino neighborhood developed a pragmatic housing development plan. Members of the group obtained site control and proceeded to work strategically. They succeeded, and the construction began. The buyers were selected and finally the whole process was completed.

It was time for a celebration. The families and the entire neighborhood had a reason to have a party. We assembled the families in front of their new homes. Local politicians were present as well as the media. At the beginning of the event, there was nothing but pride and smiles. As the congratulatory speeches, laced with self-promotion, dragged on from the government, philanthropic, and banking dignitaries, grumbling started to be heard throughout the audience of residents. It began in the back and spread throughout the entire crowd. They shifted on their feet, looked down at the ground, talked out of the sides of their mouths, and mumbled to fellow audience members. I whispered to our organizer, "Find out what's wrong." He came back 2 minutes later with his report. It turned out that people from the neighborhood had set up a barbeque pit behind the new homes and had a goat slow cooking in honor of the occasion. He said he didn't know what to do. Another 30 minutes of speeches were scheduled. I said he needed to get up on the stage, and get the emcee to say in Spanish, "Let's roast the goat." The emcee did as requested. A huge cheer went up, as loud as when a goal was scored by the Mexican national soccer team. The whole crowd ran right past the dignitaries and straight toward the goat.

Always try to remember that in every place you work, with every group of coworkers, clients, and volunteers, there will be differences and similarities. You must realize that there is a good deal of skill and experience that goes into sorting out these differences and similarities. You have to become

good at identifying both. Identifying differences will make your job interesting. You will see how people's culture shapes their thoughts and behavior. The differences you find will be like individual pearls, each beautiful and valuable, but not quite the same. The similarities you find will be the string that holds those slightly different pearls together. So there you have it. Start stringing!

Reflection Questions

1. Many believe that cultural competency is just an academic term. What does it mean to you?
2. Sometimes people divide us up on purpose. Have you ever seen this done? Explain.
3. What was the original meaning of "Don't mess with Texas"?
4. What is more important—understanding oneself or understanding others?
5. Do you ever think there will be a time when we don't need to think about cultural competency?

