

Multicultural Guidelines for Engaging Across Differences

Successful outcomes across cultural differences are more likely to occur when agreed upon guiding principles are used. The following guidelines have been successfully used in VISIONS' work with individuals and organizations for more than 25 years.

1. **“Try on”** is an invitation to be open-minded to others' ideas, feelings, worldviews and ways of doing things so that greater exploration and understanding are possible. The invitation also includes feeling free to take those things that “fit” and to leave or file away those things that don't fit.
2. **“It's Ok to disagree”** assumes that disagreement is not only inevitable but can help individuals and groups produce better outcomes. By acknowledging what we have in common **and** by recognizing, understanding, and appreciating what is different between us, we can shift the pressure to “be”, “think”, or “act” the same into permission to generate all possible ideas and strategies. This guideline assumes we can disagree and still stay connected and do great work.
3. **“It's not OK to blame, shame or attack ourselves or others”** assumes that most of us have learned well how to show our disagreement by making the other person wrong. This happens in direct, indirect, verbal and non-verbal ways. When we attack, shame, or blame ourselves and others, we are less likely to take in what others are sharing and less likely to problem-solve across our differences.
4. **“Practice self-focus”** assumes that our learning about differences can be accelerated and maximized when we listen to our internal thoughts, feelings and reactions. When we find ourselves getting irritated with someone about cultural differences, we can blame or shame them or ourselves, or we can figure out internally what is causing our irritation. An effective tool for practicing self-focus is using “I”, rather than “we”, “you”, or “one” statements. When we intend to refer to others, be specific about who those others are -- by name or group. In addition, when speaking about our own experience or opinion, use “I have found.....” or “I think, I feel, I believe ...” and include feeling words, e.g. mad, sad, scared, happy, and relieved, etc.

5. **“Notice both the process and content”** means notice both, “what we say”, “how “and “why” we say or do something and how the members of the group react. For example, notice who's active and who's not, who's comfortable and who's not, who's interested and who's not, including ourselves. Ask about both the process and content, and share our own thoughts and feelings too.
6. **“Practice “both/and” thinking”** invites us to see that more than one reality or perspective can be true at the same time (diunital thinking) rather than seeing reality as strictly either/or, right or wrong, good or bad, this or that (dichotomous thinking). Using “both/and thinking” can be very helpful in reconciling differences and conflicts that do not present easy solutions.
7. **“Be aware of both the intent and impact of your actions”** invites us to consider that in cross-cultural interactions, our intent might not match our impact. When we have a negative impact on others across culture, ensuring a successful outcome requires changing that negative impact. This guideline requires a willingness to take risks and to exchange and receive honest feedback about the impact of our words and actions on others. It is possible to be well-intentioned AND still say and do hurtful things. To be successful across differences, we must be willing to shift our behaviors and actions such that people who are different from us feel fully valued and included.
8. **“Confidentiality”** invites us to honor personal sharing and to not repeat personal details outside of the group. Confidentiality assumes that feeling free to share in one setting, does not translate into comfort in other settings. So, if we want to bring up information related to a person’s sharing in other settings, we need to privately ask the person if it is acceptable to do so. Confidentiality also assumes that we will not use something someone has shared to hurt them, get them, or punish them later. This is especially important for work groups or teams involving multiple staff or organizational levels. Participants are encouraged to freely share their learnings about theory, practice and themselves in any setting of their choice.