

Seven Ways to Make Diversity Work in Your Unit

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Over the past several years, the notion of “valuing diversity” at the workplace has reached a new level. More and more, people in leadership have an understanding of “diversity” as one that acknowledges the uniqueness of every member of a workforce body (i.e., background, experiences, perspectives/insights, work styles, talents, and other personal attributes) and the potential value *each person* brings to the workplace. They realize that people are an invaluable resource that brings a range of abilities, styles, and ideas to the table. The greater the range (or diversity) represented, the greater the overall workforce capacity, as long as every person feels valued in the workplace setting and everyone is working toward a common goal.

What does this mean for the busy child welfare supervisor who has a hand in orienting and managing this workforce? Ideally, it means that team members should have enough buy-in and input into the “workplace culture” to see themselves positively reflected in it and feel valued as contributing members. Both conditions are powerful motivators for on-the-job productivity. It also means that new members who join the unit should have the same access to that workplace culture and the same opportunity to contribute positively to it.

The key questions for supervisors, then, become:

- “How can I cultivate a workplace culture that effectively addresses the diversity in my unit? What initiatives or mechanisms might I put in place?”

AND

- “How can I bring a new person into an already-established unit, where there’s room enough to accommodate *new* diversity?”



Cultivating a Workplace Culture that Effectively Addresses Its Members' Diversity

Past models of “diversity” generally focused on race, ethnicity, or national origin as the main factors that predict and explain differences between people, but, of course, there’s so much more to diversity. Most of these models also directed us to seek to understand and appreciate “diversity” with reference to “the other guy.” This allowed our human tendency to see ourselves unconsciously as “the standard” and everyone else as “different” to go unchallenged. Experts in the field of diversity, however, agree that before we can give due consideration to each person’s uniqueness, we must humbly come to acknowledge *our own*, not as the standard for measuring others, but as yet another brand of diversity.

Here are some first steps child welfare supervisors can take to ensure that staff feel recognized and valued for the uniqueness each one brings to the table:

- 1. Familiarize yourself with the concepts tied to a broader understanding of diversity—then take some time to explore your own diversity.**

The OCWTP offers a short, self-directed online module called [Key Concepts in Culture and Diversity](#). The course gives an overview of diversity concepts, explains what they mean within the context of sound child welfare practice, and gives examples of the different kinds of diversity that are represented across the members of your unit. It also invites you to consider the nature and sources of your own uniqueness. To access the module, click on the link above.

- 2. Build relationships with members of your unit as a way to discover each person’s uniqueness, and customize your interactions (at least to some extent) to the person you’re working with. Remember, the climate of any workplace is founded on the quality of its relationships.**

As one local supervisor recently put it:

“It’s been well worth the effort to get to know the members of my staff as individuals—to sit down with each of them and find out what matters to them: their interests, their own family values, how they interact with others. For the ones who like to chit-chat, I might take them for ice cream or coffee and hear their stories. For the members of my staff who like to ‘get down to business,’ I ask the same things in a straightforward manner.”



There are other points of difference to consider. Some people are more formal, others informal; some look to be directed, others look more to themselves; some prefer working solo, while others like being collaborative. No one way is intrinsically right or wrong. As is generally the case in all kinds of diversity, each has its benefits and limitations, often depending on the situation. Ideally, a supervisor has enough self-awareness to recognize which approach he or she tends to lean toward, but is willing to flex with staff whose work styles are different. For a more complete list of diversity in work styles, click [here](#).

3. Make sure your unit is familiar with the concepts, practices, and benefits attached to being mindful of diversity, both at the agency and when working with families.

Through trainings, team meetings, and other resources (such as the [Key Concepts in Culture and Diversity](#) online module mentioned above), make sure the members of your unit understand the concepts tied to a broader understanding of diversity. Then, continue to model how to work with diversity by taking an individualized approach with each of them.

In the words of the same supervisor mentioned above:

“By understanding the diversity of my individual staff members, I see both my unit’s strengths and their needs for development. Sometimes it means pairing workers of contrasting abilities to join their efforts on a particular case visit. Other times it means reminding workers to “flex” according to the needs of the individual family. If, for example, I see that a worker’s informality sometimes interferes with his or her effectiveness, I encourage him or her to read the signs of when to flex toward formality. And in cases when a worker’s personal values run counter to the values held dear by the family, I gently challenge that worker to look at the question: *Is it actually a question of the child’s safety, or is it a question of my cultural bias?*”

4. Seek periodic feedback from your team members on *their* views of how the unit is functioning.

Based on the principle of “cultural humility,” if you want to be mindful of another’s diversity, go to the source and *ask for their guidance*.

You might spend some time at a unit meeting when you talk as a group about your “unit culture,” referring to tone, expectations, interpersonal dynamics, and the unwritten rules about how things should be done at the unit. The exercise could be as simple as inviting members to list and describe anonymously what they like about the existing unit culture and, on the flip side, what elements they’d like to see changed or added. Use the suggestions as a springboard for considering which ones could (or could not) be easily accommodated. Drawing on agency policies, mission, values, or principles, explain the limitations and possibilities. Where possible, seek your workers’ input and involve them in making a positive change. You might be surprised by their ingenuity at finding approaches and solutions you hadn’t considered, which is another benefit of workplace diversity.

Introducing New People/Diversity to the Workplace Culture

The first step to help new hires feel included in your unit is to bring them to an already-inclusive environment. By following the steps in the section above, you will have laid the foundation for a setting that’s responsive to its staff’s diversity. Here are additional steps to bring new hires into your unit:

5. **After orientation, have a one-on-one talk with new hires to articulate your personal expectations of staff. Also voice your commitment to workplace diversity. Leave the door open for further discussion.**
6. **Match new staff members with seasoned staff who can serve as mentors, introduce new hires to other staff members, and offer a fellow staffer's perspective on "how things work" at the unit, plus what's negotiable.**
7. **Hold regular, frequent meetings with new hires at first, checking in to see how things are going. As they settle into work, maintain the principles you've already established to ensure you're being responsive to your new hires' diversity.**

Concluding Remarks

As you work through the action steps outlined above, leading by example on how to work with diversity, not only will your workers appreciate the experience of having their own diversity respected; they will be better sensitized to the diversity of families--and how being responsive makes all the difference.

