

## WORKING WITH A DIVERSITY CONSULTANT

Working to develop a diverse and inclusive organization is a long-term process that can benefit, at various stages from the services of consultants who bring valuable and an outside perspective to compliment organization's capabilities and resources. But, no matter how perceptive or effective he or she may be a consultant can not substitute for a firm organizational commitment to diversity. At no time does the diversity process belong to the consultant; leadership must come from those within the organization who carry out the vision of a more inclusive operation. The most appropriate role for a consultant is as a facilitator who works collaboratively with board and staff to realize the organization's diversity goals.

Consultancies can vary in their success. But if an organization clearly understands the role of the consultant and takes care in selecting the appropriate person or team, there is a much greater likelihood for positive results.

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Organizations enjoy the most success in working with their consultants and in achieving their objectives if they first build a strong foundation for their diversity work, including:

Commitment from board and senior management:

Perhaps this is obvious, but it is so important that it warrants emphasis. Formal and public commitment to diversity from both the board and senior management are crucial to the success of any efforts to increase diversity. Continuing support is equally critical because progress is often slow, and once policy becomes practice it is often unsettling.

Assignment of a staff diversity coordinator:

Little can be accomplished without a staff member who can provide consistent support and coordination of the organization's efforts. The assignment of a senior manager as diversity coordinator may lend increased credibility to diversity efforts and may increase the impact on the agency. In any event, the position--and the time it requires--must be acknowledged as part of the individual's ongoing workload and responsibilities. To be effective, the diversity coordinator should work with a cross-section of people within the organization who are also committed to the project.

Establishment of a diversity committee:

The diversity committee handles overall planning and oversight of diversity activities and provides the thread of communication and continuity within the organization. The committee is typically chaired by the diversity coordinator. While maintaining a manageable size, committee members should represent as many racial and cultural groups and levels of the organization as possible. Given the varying background of committee members, diversity committees often take some time to coalesce. Concrete activities, such as the initial

assessment or the consultant selection process, help to create an effective working group.

Some personal involvement of the executive director or other top manager is crucial. Similarly, it is optimal to have board representatives participate on the committee, although some organizations have successfully employed separate but overlapping staff and board diversity committees.

Overall diversity assessment:

An examination of the diversity status overall is the first step to developing a plan for improvement. Staff and board should identify challenges and strengths of the organization as they relate to diversity. The challenges should be addressed very early in the process, even if an organization is unable to conduct a full assessment without outside assistance. Once this initial assessment has been conducted, it is often very valuable to hire a consultant to help facilitate a more comprehensive needs assessment and to bring objectivity and confidentiality to the process.

Development of a Diversity Plan:

The internal needs assessment will undoubtedly reveal a number of priorities and issues for the organization to address. Again, it is often valuable to hire a consultant to assist in more fully developing the diversity plan and/or to implement parts of the plan. In general, the more planning and specificity of tasks the better.

Identification of consultant's role:

Before hiring a consultant, an organization should have at least an initial plan that includes goals and objectives, a feasible schedule of activities, and clearly articulated expectations for both parties. The organization can then work in concert with the consultant to refine and solidify its diversity plan.

## RECRUITING AND SELECTING THE RIGHT CONSULTANT

The diversity committee should be actively involved in identifying and selecting a consultant and in introducing that consultant to the needs and working style of the organization. As in seeking any services, an organization should look first for an individual with the right skills and expertise. However, diversity initiatives tend to be much more complex than other projects, such as developing a marketing plan or introducing a new accounting system. The diversity process touches all aspects of an organization, from philosophy to governance to daily operations and often raises many sensitive issues. General gaps in organizational operations are frequently revealed during diversity work. A consultant should have a firm grasp of organizational development and an empathetic approach to interpersonal dynamics.

Working with one consultant throughout a diversity initiative can bring a strong sense of continuity, provided the consultant can offer the range of skills required. Some organizations have successfully worked with several consultants with specialized skills in such areas as needs assessments or training.

Some organizations have success working with consultants who have helped them in the past and with whom they already share a level of trust and understanding. Otherwise, an organization should start the process of identifying potential consultants early and seek recommendations from many sources. The Diversity Initiative can supply a list of consultants, but the list is by no means exhaustive and should be supplemented with suggestions from within the organization's staff and board through their personal networks and from other nonprofit organizations.

#### Consultant qualifications:

An organization should consider a number of factors when evaluating potential consultants:

- **Experience with diversity:** In general, consultants who have extensive experience with a broad range of diversity issues (beyond race and ethnicity) are often the most successful. Some staff or board members may try to use diversity training to raise other organizational issue such as compensation equity or employee morale. An effective consultant will be able to acknowledge these other issues while maintaining a focus on diversity.
- **Cultural/racial minority status:** Consultants from minority backgrounds have a more direct personal understanding of the issue of diversity and may also have greater credibility. However, some non-minority consultants also have successful track records in addressing diversity issues.
- **Flexibility and Fit:** The most successful consultants approach diversity work as a process that naturally varies from organization to organization. They are willing to revise and rethink their plans and assumptions to respond to the client's needs. No matter how qualified the consultant and how committed the organization, not every consultancy works. An organization must carefully consider whether or not the consultant will be a good fit with the organizational culture and should feel confident that the consultant is able to assemble a team with a mix of gender and race that will expand upon the expertise needed to facilitate organizational activities.
- **Experience with organizational change:** Consultants who have a grasp of organizational development issues and process lend a beneficial perspective when there is resistance to change and when organizations reach the inevitable plateaus that are a part of developing more inclusive operations. Often, diversity issues cannot be separated from other management issues and a consultant can assist in developing a comprehensive approach and in strategizing to overcome barriers.
- **Review and contracting:**
- The process of hiring a consultant is not unlike hiring an employee. The diversity committee should take the lead in conducting a thorough review process that recognizes the key role that the consultant will play. Essential elements of the process include:
- **Written request for proposal (RFP):** Writing an RFP helps an organization clarify its goals and objectives as well as its expectations of a consultant.

In turn, the RFP gives prospective consultants a clear understanding of the scope of the services required.

- **Written proposal:** A written proposal from a prospective consultant provides a good start in evaluating the consultant's interest and should give some indication of the approach the consultant will employ to meet the organization's goals and objectives.
- **Committee interviews:** After reviewing a consultant's proposal, face-to-face discussions will help the organization and the prospective consultant assess whether they can form a successful working partnership. Interviewers should ask specific questions about a prospective consultant's experiences with a variety of tasks such as facilitating meetings, writing reports and making recommendations. They should also consider whether the consultant's style would be compatible with that of the organization.
- **Review of references:** Discussion with other organizations with whom the consultant has worked can help round out the picture of a consultant's strengths, skills and working style. References are most informative if an organization can define the services it seeks and get corresponding feedback from other organizations.
- **Written contract/work plan:** A clear written contract, including a work schedule and products, such as reports and training sessions, will help assure mutual understanding of the work to be undertaken and clarify the responsibilities of each party.

## TAKING ACTION

Consultants generally provide support and backup to the diversity coordinator and committee. They may play ongoing roles in diversity efforts or may be employed more strategically to provide technical expertise or to participate in specific activities. Either approach can be successful if the consultancy is well-planned from the outset; many consultants perform several functions.

Consultants are most often asked to provide training to staff and board on issues associated with cultural, racial and other aspects of diversity. Factors to consider in implementing successful training programs are discussed in detail later in this section.

However, a consultant may also play other valuable roles. For example, consultants may help expand the initial research and planning for diversity. Or, at the most fundamental level, a consultant may help to institutionalize the commitment to diversity by addressing key operating procedures and essential issues of governance and policy and their links to the constituents served by the organization.

### Diversity assessment:

Consultants often are able to conduct a more thorough and objective evaluation of internal diversity than an organization can accomplish on its own. Some consultants are skilled in conducting focus groups, for example, that promote involvement and commitment to diversity issues while simultaneously gathering

valuable information. Their work can verify, clarify or refute initial assumptions. Written reports from such activities may include recommendations for action.

#### Diversity planning:

Planning continues throughout a diversity process. The internal diversity challenges and strengths identified by staff and board at the outset of the diversity process define the organization's issues and guide the process of hiring a consultant. Once a consultant is selected, a collaborative planning process helps the committee decide on supporting activities to address the issues (e.g., workshops, training sessions) that are compatible with work schedules and fit within the budget for the diversity work. There is greatest potential for success when diversity-related goals become part of the organization's overall strategic planning process. Consultants often guide organizations in making this transition in thinking and setting priorities. Having the foresight to establish diversity as an organizational goal from the outset helps move these activities from the category of an "extra" initiative to an integrated and mainstream component of the organization's work.

#### Revisions in systems and procedures:

Focusing on internal systems and procedures can lead to major results in increasing diversity. To effect this type of operational change, a consultant typically works with a senior manager or committee to develop or revise internal procedures that have an impact on diversity, such as recruitment and hiring practices, vendors used, affirmative action policy, professional development and procedures for grievances or layoffs.

#### Changes in governance and policy:

Key organizational leaders must be involved in addressing any diversity issues which are inherent to the organization. The executive director, board members or board committees may work with a consultant to examine an organization's mission, by-laws, and policies as they relate to cultural and racial diversity. As a result, specific statements about diversity may be added to an organization's mission statement, by-laws and other governing documents and incorporated into operational policies such as the personnel performance review process.

#### Training:

Most of the consultants hired through the Diversity Initiative provided awareness training to staff and board members on issues associated with cultural and racial inclusion strategies--and most organizations were satisfied with the training that they received. Nonetheless, diversity training is not an easy or straightforward process. Discussion of diversity will inevitably touch on sensitive personal and organizational issues that can provoke complex, ambivalent, and in some cases, painful reactions among the participants. There are a number of factors that the consultant and the organization should consider to help make training a positive experience:

- Needs assessment: Apart from the overall agency needs assessment discussed above, consultants may meet with selected agency staff to determine specific needs and concerns. Training sessions that are most relevant to the particular needs of the individuals involved tend to have

- the most impact. On the other hand, in most cases where trainees express dissatisfaction, a needs assessment has not been conducted.
- **Content:** General training to increase awareness of and sensitivity to such differences as culture, race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation or ability is a valuable first step. However, individuals also seek more specific and practical training that relates directly to their work and helps them to do their jobs better. Follow-up sessions could address both external and internal situations, such as cultural issues that affect clinical work with clients or steps to team building and improved staff communication.
  - **Approach:** Effective diversity training acknowledges at the outset that some participants will have strong reactions and encourages the group to accept and respect the feelings and responses of members. The process cannot be rushed or abbreviated and must allow ample time to defuse volatile situations. Insufficient follow-up to reconcile issues raised was seen as a major detriment to the process.
  - **Target groups:** All levels of organizational leadership and administration should take part in diversity training, including board members, senior managers, diversity committee members, middle managers and line staff. Training may progress on parallel tracks, sequentially, or in some combination. Inclusiveness, not sequence, is the most important consideration.
  - **Group size:** Small group training sessions, particularly those organized around the needs of groups that work together, are typically the most well-received. However, large group training sessions can be successful if they are carefully planned.
  - In general, training sessions are not successful if unresolved issues and emotions are not addressed in a timely way. Effective diversity training changes an organization one individual at a time by promoting respect for, increased understanding of and sensitivity to issues of difference. However, individual growth and change do not necessarily lead to increased diversity on the board or within the workforce or to changes in organizational structure and policy. Training is most successful when it is reinforced by concrete actions that support the organization's mission and policies and acknowledge that the organization should reflect the larger community it serves.