Adaptive Leadership for Public Health Podcast Series

Episode #3: Cultural Competency

Hello everyone, and welcome to Adaptive Leadership for Public Health, a podcast created to help you address the complex challenges of public health leadership by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. This podcast is sponsored by the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University.

My name is Brandy Walker and I am faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, a unit of Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia. I'll be your host as we explore various aspects of adaptive leadership through our podcast. Today's episode is about the adaptive leader's commitment to cultural competency.

Recall that adaptive leaders recognize the value and importance of hearing from multiple voices and promoting problem-solving from multiple perspectives.

As you listen to this episode, reflect on how you integrate multiple perspectives in your work as a public health leader by recognizing and respecting different cultural backgrounds in your organization and in the communities you serve. Successful Public Health professionals know that for interventions and campaigns to be increasingly effective, cultural processes and values that lead to different health statuses must be integrated into their work.

In this episode, I'm going to touch on 4 areas of cultural competency, namely some **broad tenants of cultural competency**, aspects of a **diversity model**, an **inclusion scale**, and key **traits of an inclusive leader**. Now, that may sound like a lot, and it is because we could spend hours on each of those areas. But not to worry, this episode will stay in our regular time frame. But to do so, we're only going to scratch the surface of these topics in this episode. I encourage you to pause and reflect even as you listen to this episode for the first time, and then dig in to these ideas more as you listen again to identify areas of your cultural competency practice where you can improve and grow as an adaptive leader.

OK, let's get rolling.

First, let's start with some definitions to ground us:

Cultural Competency has been defined by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services as: a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations.

Breaking that down even more:

Culture refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include things like language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups.

Competence implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by stakeholders and communities.

Putting that all together, cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively in cross-culture situations.

Ok, now that we're on the same page,

Let's start diving into this concept with 4 tenets that frame how to base our understanding of cultural competency:

They are **awareness**, **attitudes**, **knowledge**, and **skills**.

Your **awareness** of your own cultural worldview is critical. Becoming aware of your cultural worldview allows you to be more intentional and objective as you explore what you may subconsciously be bringing to every interpersonal interaction. Think of this as stopping to think about what is just 'normal' for you. Have you heard that expression: "Normal is just a setting on the dryer"? What seems normal to you in a cultural context might not seem normal to someone else. Thinking through the way you view the world to define "normal" helps you recognize your culture.

Next, we have our **attitudes** toward cultural differences, which also play a key role. In order to possess a fully open attitude, we must not only know what we intend to learn, but also try to move forward with a spirit of curiosity about ourselves and others. If we have an attitude that "our way is the only way," or that we don't have anything to learn, we can't be curious about those differences that make up the various perspectives in the world.

That attitude of curiosity makes us interested in knowing more, and **knowledge** is the 3rd tenet: specifically, the knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews. The cultural knowledge that we gain can develop into our final tenet, which is cultural skills.

The tenet of **skills** focuses on how we engage with cultural differences, for example, in the health care profession, by asking more informed questions about a patient's beliefs and practices.

So again, the 4 tenets that frame how to base our understanding of cultural competency are **awareness**, **attitudes**, **knowledge**, and **skills**.

In order to be culturally competent, Public Health as a field must recognize an inclusive definition of diversity.

This may seem silly to say, but diversity doesn't mean just one thing. That wouldn't be very diverse now would it? So let's turn to identify aspects of diversity that make that term inclusive.

There are a variety of diversity models out there often depicted as wheels with various components that you can use to distinguish the ways you can explore diversity. The top markers of diversity tend to be race and gender, but there are so many more to consider. For example, you can explore relational diversity based on generational differences, the relationships you have with others such as your family, parental, or marriage status. You can explore cognitive diversity by looking at the way people process the world through communication, interpersonal styles, mental abilities, learning preferences. Then there are personal values that encompass your beliefs, attitudes, the culture that you identify with, morals, and religious values. You can explore occupational diversity by looking at experiences in the workforce, tenure in a profession, skills and talents, work styles, expertise. And then you have societal diversity aspects such as education, geographic location, language, socio-economic status, and even ethnicity.

Here's an example of how to expand your diversity thinking: when you are initiating a public health campaign in communities, how can educational backgrounds and language affect the success of your outreach? What are the means of outreach and how do socio-economic factors affect it?

And another example: when you are building teams in your organization, consider how a multigenerational workforce adds to your ability to address communities. How do you help members in your organization assess communication and work styles to make the most effective teams?

In many instances, one size does not fit all, so thinking through the dimensions of diversity can help you develop solutions that address the different needs of all.

> *Pause for a moment and think about how all of these various aspects of diversity can impact the work you do in public health.*

One way to think about how we approach diversity is how we come to terms with our attitudes, beliefs, and experiences with others to gain comfort with difference.

This takes us to our next aspect of cultural competency, which is the inclusion scale. This scale helps you categorize your reactions to differences. Why is this important? Well, creating a culture of inclusion helps individuals feel psychologically safe. As a quick preview, in our next

episode of this podcast we'll look at how the brain responds in situations of psychological and social threat and address ways to transform the conflict that might cause.

Back to our inclusion scale. This scale ranges from appreciating differences to the opposite end, which is being repulsed by differences. Let's start at that lower end with **repulsion**—at this point your belief is that the people who are repulsing you are different in ways that just are not normal or socially, morally, or otherwise acceptable in your workplace. What examples can you think of that would fall into this category? Again, this repulsion comes from seeing the difference as something wholly unacceptable on a moral, social or other level. You can see how this level of inclusion (or lack thereof) would create an unhealthy and ineffective work environment.

The next level on the inclusion scale is **avoidance**. In this situation, you might feel uncomfortable with peers that are different because you don't understand that difference and it makes you feel uncomfortable enough to avoid working with them. Imagine how this might play out in community public health contexts. Are there community groups that some of members in your organization just don't "get" or feel uncomfortable around? Are they at the "avoiding" level of the inclusion scale?

Next, we have **tolerance**, which is when people feel uncomfortable with the difference they are facing, but they think everyone should be treated respectfully. This still means they don't really want to interact with them, if they had a choice.

After tolerance comes **acceptance**. This is when differences don't seem to matter. You are comfortable around the differences that you just don't seem to see anymore. Your focus is on the things you have in common rather than the differences. This is our goal, right? Well…there is a higher level to achieve if you're really wanting to become a strong adaptive leader.

That highest level of inclusion is **appreciation**. This is when you DO see people's differences, and you see them as positive. These differences become things you can value and leverage for greater diversity of perspectives in the work you do.

> *Pause for a moment and think about how the awareness of this inclusion scale can help you pinpoint areas where cultural competency might be strengthened in your own outlook and in the mindset of members in your organization.*

And the final aspect of cultural competency that we'll address in this episode is what makes an inclusive leader. There are a variety of theoretical models that combine to build up characteristics of an inclusive leader from servant leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, to name a few. I'm going to share with you 6 specific traits of an inclusive leader as developed by researchers at the Deloitte organization.

I'll give you the 6 traits and then give you a tiny glimpse into each one, but there is so much more time needed to unpack these, so your task is to listen, reflect, and dig into the areas that are most interesting to you.

The 6 traits of an inclusive leader are:

1. Commitment
2. Courage
3. Cognizance, or the awareness of bias
4. Curiosity
5. Cultural Intelligence, and
6. Collaboration

Starting with the first trait of **commitment**: Inclusive leaders need an authentic commitment to diversity and inclusion. That commitment comes from an alignment with their own personal values, and also the recognition in the workplace that diversity and inclusion is valuable because of the talent, innovation, and widening perspectives that it brings to tackling the problems we face. If you don't start with an authentic commitment, inclusion can become superficial, and people see right through it.

The second trait of an inclusive leader is **courage**. It takes courage to speak up and challenge the status quo. Courage encompasses both bravery and humility. Bravery involves challenging potentially entrenched organizational attitudes and practices that promote homogeneity and work against diversity. It also involves holding others accountable for non-inclusive behaviors. Humility includes acknowledging your own personal limitations and weaknesses, admitting when mistakes are made, and looking for contributions of others who have different skills to overcome your own limitations.

The next trait of **cognizance** means that inclusive leaders are mindful of the blind spots they have and that might be present in their organization. There are so many ways to approach these bias blind spots, but the first step is recognizing that we all have them and we are all vulnerable to different types of biases creeping into our attitudes and behaviors. This allows us to be more reflective and question where biases may be to build better strategies for dealing with them.

Biases come in many forms, ranging from implicit stereotypes where we might unintentionally judge others based on unconscious stereotypes, to confirmation bias, when we look for information or interpret information that is partial to our existing beliefs. In other words, we look for evidence that supports what we already believe to be true.

And then there is similarity-attraction bias, which is the tendency to more easily and deeply connect with people who "look and feel" like ourselves. You know this one—you automatically

'like' someone who supports the same team as you and have an immediate distrust of someone who doesn't. You know who they are…

Again, we could do much more on this trait of cognizance, but I promised we'd stick to our schedule, so let's move on!

The next trait of an inclusive leader is **curiosity**. This is such fun one to cultivate! Having an open mindset, and a desire to understand how others view and experience the world helps you strengthen this trait of curiosity. It also requires that you have a bit of tolerance for ambiguity as you address adaptive challenges. Actively seeking the ideas of others who think differently from you is one way to engage your trait of curiosity. Withholding judgment from those who are different from you, and engaging in respectful and curious questioning to better understand their viewpoints is a great way to bring curiosity into your leadership style.

Our 5th trait of an inclusive leader is your **cultural intelligence**. This isn't your IQ but your C-Q, which is your capability to relate and work effectively in culturally diverse situations. This CQ measure can be explored in a variety of assessment tools out there that generally measure 4 domains: drive, knowledge, strategy and action. I'll say a little about each of these domains.

First, the **drive** domain addresses your motivation to interact with people who are different, as well as the drive and energy you need to adapt in cross-cultural situations.

The **knowledge** domain addresses what you know about similarities and differences across cultures, ranging from general understanding of cultural systems and norms, as well as more context-specific understanding of cultural differences.

The **strategy** domain addresses your ability to be strategic before, during, and after an encounter, starting with a plan for that intercultural encounter. Then, being aware or in tune with what's going on in your mind and with others during that encounter, and finally, reflecting on your experience afterwards to see if you need to adjust your mental models, to learn from the interaction, and to be better prepared for the next one. I always say, leadership ultimately is about being strategic and intentional about your actions and interactions with others.

Which leads us to the last domain of cultural intelligence: your **actions**. These include what you say, how you say it, and the nonverbal behaviors that make up your communications with others.

Reflect on your cultural intelligence by thinking through these domains and how they impact your intercultural interactions.

And finally, our last trait of an inclusive leader is **collaboration**. Some people say that the old IQ is about how smart you are, whereas the new IQ is how smart your team is. Collaboration takes time, energy, and effort, but the rewards of diverse minds coming together to solve the

complex and multi-faceted problems we face, is hopefully worth it. In public health contexts, when you find a lack of cultural understanding in program, it is often a result of not having collaborative input from the communities being served.

There are 3 main elements of collaboration to consider for this inclusive leadership trait, and they are **empowerment**, **teaming**, and **voice**.

Empowerment means making sure that members of your team and community collaborations feel able and comfortable to contribute is key.

In terms of **teaming**, inclusive leaders are intentional about building teams that are diverse in thinking, and having strategies in place for conflict that may (and usually will) emerge.

The collaboration element of **voice** means that inclusive leaders create environments in which people feel safe and comfortable to speak up and are explicit about including all members in the collaborative conversations.

Now, as I mentioned, our next episode will address conflict transformation, and then we also have another episode that will address collaborative leadership, so much more on those two topics to come.

I'll close with some general points on what organizations need to strengthen their cultural competency:

First, they need to have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable their people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

They need the capacity to value diversity, conduct self-assessments, manage the dynamics of difference, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and adapt to the diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve.

And finally, they need to incorporate all of that in all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, service delivery, while involving key stakeholders and communities in those processes.

In summary:

Adaptive leaders need to continually develop their cultural competency individually and within the organizations that serve the public health. Understanding and being adept at inclusive leadership will help you thrive in the increasingly diverse environments of public health. In this episode I've shared with you a lot of information, most of it to introduce you to topics that you need to explore more. Your job now is to reflect on these aspects of cultural competency and decide what areas you need to pursue for yourself, for your teams, and for your organization to build that capacity.

I'll leave you with this final insight from a public health professional that I worked with recently. He said:

> "*Diversity is important to what I do. Diversity takes time to understand. Diversity is necessary, beautiful, and unique.*"

On behalf of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I want to thank you for listening. We hope this podcast will help you build your confidence and capacity to address complex challenges in your public health organization by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. Our next episode will focus on conflict transformation as an important part of adaptive leadership. Until next time, reflect on what you've heard and how it fits into your leadership journey.