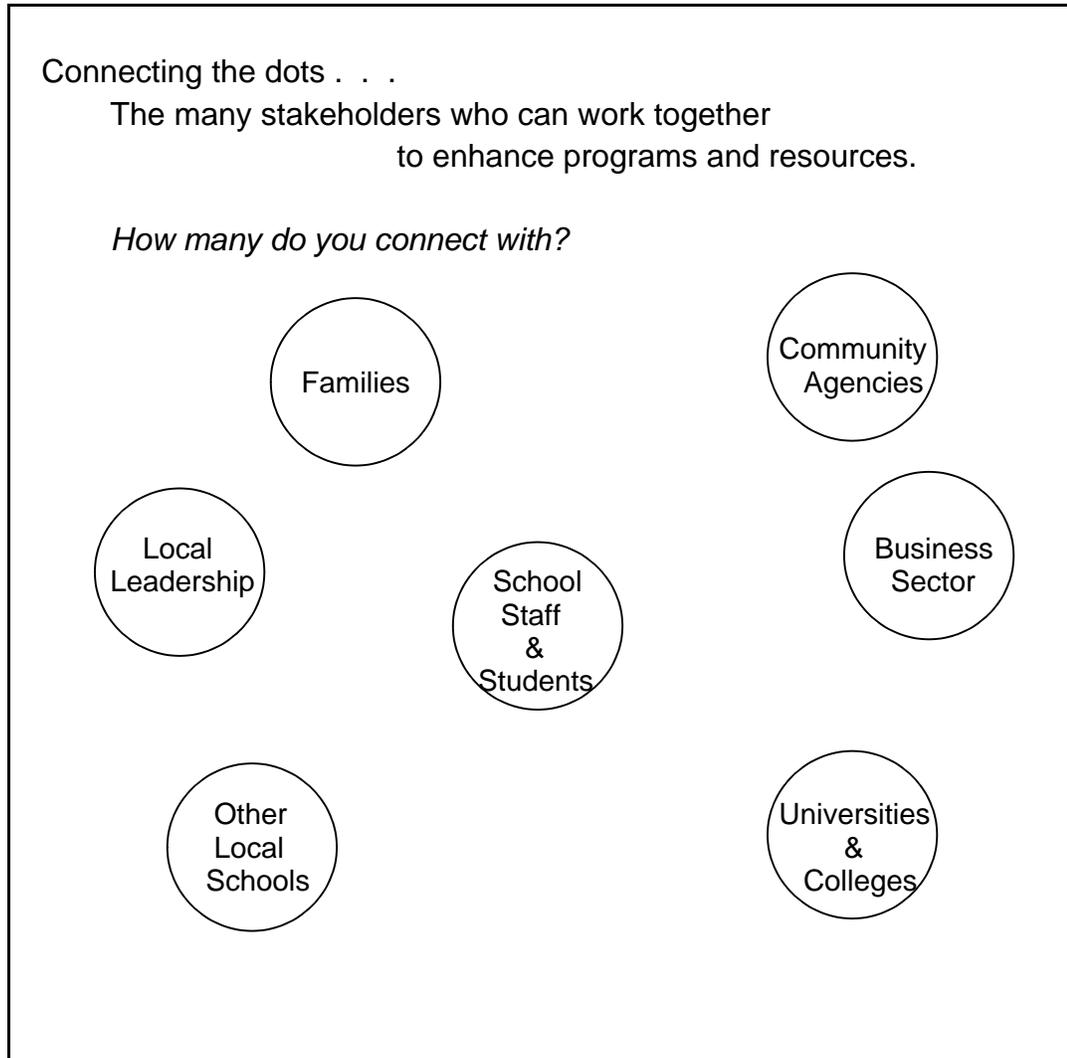


# Working Relationships\*

## Working with Others to Enhance Programs and Resources



### Contents:

*It's not about collaboration,  
it's about being effective*

*Differences as a Problem*

*Differences as a Barrier*

*Overcoming Barriers Related to Differences*

*Building Rapport and Connection*

**\*From a 2008 Continuing Education Module**

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## Objectives

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- identify at least three necessary ingredients in building positive working relationships
- identify at least three cultural competence values.

### **A Few Focusing Questions**

- *What types of differences might interfere with working relationships?*
- *How can barriers to working relationships be overcome?*
- *What role might cultural competence and cultural values play in enhancing working relationships?*

Treat people as if they were  
what they ought to be  
and you help them become  
what they are capable of being.  
Goethe

## ***It's Not About Collaboration. It's About Being Effective***

Most of us know how hard it is to work effectively with a group. Many staff members at a school site have jobs that allow them to carry out their duties each day in relative isolation of other staff. And despite various frustrations they encounter in doing so, they can see little to be gained through joining up with others. In fact, they often can point to many committees and teams that drained their time and energy to little avail.

Despite all this, the fact remains that no organization can be truly effective if everyone works in isolation. And it is a simple truth that there is no way for schools to play their role in addressing barriers to student learning and enhancing healthy development if a critical mass of stakeholders do not work together towards a shared vision. There are policies to advocate for, decisions to make, problems to solve, and interventions to plan, implement, and evaluate.

Obviously, true collaboration involves more than meeting and talking. The point is to work together in ways that produce the type of actions that result in effective programs. For this to happen, steps must be taken to ensure that committees, councils, and teams are formed in ways that ensure they can be effective. This includes providing them with the training, time, support, and authority to carry out their role and functions. It is when such matters are ignored that groups find themselves meeting and meeting, but going nowhere.

There are many committees and teams that those concerned with addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development can and should be part of. These include school-site shared decision making bodies, committees that plan programs, teams that review students referred because of problems and that manage care, quality review bodies, and program management teams.

Probably the most common, and ultimately the most damaging, mistake made by those eager to work together as a team or collaborative is moving to create a meeting structure before clearly specifying the ongoing functions that will guide the work.

For example, community collaboratives are a frequently formed structure that brings together leaders from school and community (e.g., public and private service and youth development programs). There is a hope that by having key people meet together significant program and systemic changes will be developed (e.g., changes that will enhance access and availability of services and improve coordination and integration).

Instead what often happens is the following . . .

Because they seldom have time to meet together, the leaders take the opportunity of the first couple of meetings to share what they are doing and to learn more about what others are doing. However, after the first meetings, it becomes evident that the group has no functions beyond communication and sharing. Having done their sharing, the leaders usually decide the meeting is not worth their time, and they begin sending their middle managers.

The middle managers usually are pleased for the chance to meet their counterparts and do some sharing. Again, this usually lasts for a couple of meetings before they decide to send line staff to represent them.

The line staff usually are pleased to come together to learn about each others work and often with a strong desire to see greater collaboration among schools and community institutions and agencies. However, as they discuss matters, it is painfully evident to them that nothing major can be changed because those with decision making power are no longer at the table.

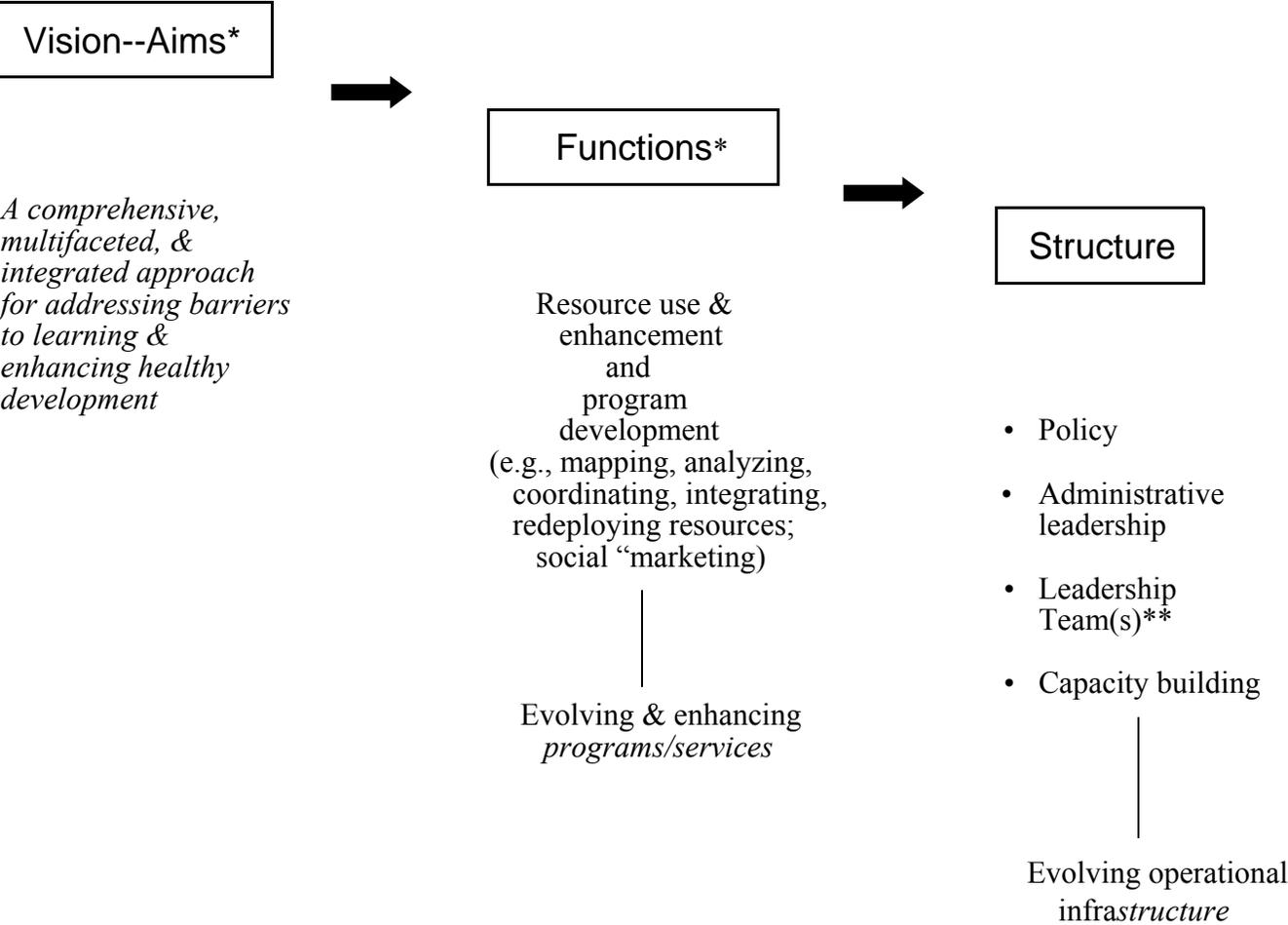
After several more meetings, the participants usually tire of “appreciating the problem” and describing possible solutions that are never heard by those in decision making roles. The result is that attendance drops or becomes sporadic – with new faces appearing as one line staff member fills in for another. Sometimes this results in outreach to a new set of institutions/agencies, but the process tends to repeat itself.

The problem arises from setting up structures before there is clarity about functions that require attention. It is the functions that should determine the mechanism (structure) that will be established to address them. The point to remember is that structure *follows* function. (And, functions should be generated in keeping with the vision that is being pursued. A successful structure is one that is designed to focus relentlessly on carrying out specific functions.

Take for example the need to identify and analyze the resources in the community to decide where the gaps are and how to fill them. This requires several mechanisms. The identification process involves the collection of existing information. This can be done quickly by assigning a couple of individuals to “jump start” the process by preparing a working document. Drafts can be widely circulated so that many stakeholders can review and add to the product. Then, a collaborative body of key leaders is ready to meet and begin the process of analysis and formulation of possible courses of action. The group’s next functions would involve discussions with stakeholders to arrive at consensus about which courses of action will be taken.

The figure on the next page emphasizes the relationship between vision, functions, and structures with respect to efforts to develop comprehensive, multifaceted approaches for addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development.

Figure. From vision to function to structure: An example focused on working together to developed a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports.



\*Answers the question: *Collaboration for what?*

\*\*Focused mechanism(s) for operationalizing the collaborative vision and aims (e.g., mapping, analyzing, redeploying, and weaving together school and community resources; ongoing advocacy; planning; guidance)

## *Planning and Facilitating Effective Meetings*

### *Forming a Working Group*

- There should be a clear statement about the group's mission.
- Be certain that members agree to pursue the stated mission and, for the most part, share a vision.
- Pick someone who the group will respect and who either already has good facilitation skills or will commit to learning those that are needed.
- Provide training for members so they understand their role in keeping a meeting on track and turning talk into effective action..
- Designate processes (a) for sending members information before a meeting regarding what is to be accomplished, specific agenda items, and individual assignments and (b) for maintaining and circulating record of decisions and planned actions (what, who, when).

### *Meeting Format*

- Be certain there is a written agenda and that it clearly states the purpose of the meeting, specific topics, and desired outcomes for the session.
- Begin the meeting by reviewing purpose, topics, desired outcomes, etc. Until the group is functioning well, it may be necessary to review meeting ground rules.
- Facilitate the involvement of all members, and do so in ways that encourage them to focus specifically on the task. The facilitator remains neutral in discussion of issues.
- Try to maintain a comfortable pace (neither too rushed, nor too slow; try to start on time and end on time but don't be a slave to the clock).
- Periodically review what has been accomplished and move on the next item.
- Leave time to sum up and celebrate accomplishment of outcomes and end by enumerating specific follow up activity (what, who, when). End with a plan for the next meeting (date, time, tentative agenda). For a series of meetings, set the dates well in advance so members can plan their calendars.

### *Some Group Dynamics to Anticipate*

- *Hidden Agendas* – All members should agree to help keep hidden agendas in check and, when such items cannot be avoided, facilitate the rapid presentation of a point and indicate where the concern needs to be redirected.
- *A Need for Validation* – When members make the same point over and over, it usually indicates they feel an important point is not being validated. To counter such disruptive repetition, account for the item in a visible way so that members feel their contributions have been acknowledged. When the item warrants discussion at a later time, assign it to a future agenda.
- *Members are at an Impasse* – Two major reasons groups get stuck are: (a) some new ideas are needed to "get out of a box" and (b) differences in perspective need to be aired and resolved. The former problem usually can be dealt with through brainstorming or by bringing in someone with new ideas to offer; to deal with conflicts that arise over process, content, and power relationships employ problem solving and conflict management strategies (e.g., accommodation, negotiation, mediation).
- *Interpersonal Conflict and Inappropriate Competition* – These problems may be corrected by repeatedly bringing the focus back to the goal – improving outcomes for students/families; when this doesn't work; restructuring group membership may be necessary.
- *Ain't It Awful!* – Daily frustrations experienced by staff often lead them to turn meetings into gripe sessions. Outside team members (parents, agency staff, business and/or university partners) can influence school staff to exhibit their best behavior.

## *Differences as a Problem*

In pursuing working relationships, involved parties must be sensitive to a variety of human, school, community, and institutional differences and learn strategies for dealing with them. With respect to working with youngsters and their parents, staff members encounter differences in

- sociocultural and economic background and current lifestyle
  - primary language spoken
  - skin color
  - sex
  - motivation for help
- and much more.

Comparable differences are found in working with each other.

*In addition, there are differences related to power, status, and orientation.*

And, for many newcomers to a school, the culture of schools in general and that of a specific school and community may differ greatly from other settings where they have lived and worked.

For staff, existing differences may make it difficult to establish effective working relationships with youngsters and others who effect the youngster. For example, many schools do not have staff who can reach out to those whose primary language is Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Armenian, and so forth. And although workshops and presentations are offered in an effort to increase specific cultural awareness, what can be learned in this way is limited, especially when one is in a school of many cultures.

There also is a danger in prejudgments based on apparent cultural awareness. There are many reports of students who have been victimized by professionals who are so sensitized to cultural differences that they treat fourth generation Americans as if they had just migrated from their cultural homeland. Obviously, it is desirable to hire staff who have the needed language skills and cultural awareness and who do not rush to prejudge.

Given the realities of budgets and staff recruitment, however, schools and agencies cannot hire a separate specialist for all the major language, cultural, and skin color differences that exist in a school and community.

Nevertheless, the objectives of accounting for relevant differences while respecting individuality can be appreciated and addressed.

## Differences as a Barrier

*"You don't know what it's like to be poor."*

*"You're the wrong color to understand."*

*"You're being culturally insensitive."*

*"Male therapists shouldn't work with girls who have been sexually abused."*

*"How can a woman understand a male student's problems?"*

*"Social workers (nurses/MDs/psychologists/teachers) don't have the right training to help these kids."*

*"I never feel that young professionals can be trusted."*

*"How can you expect to work effectively with school personnel when you understand so little about the culture of schools and are so negative toward them and the people who staff them?"*

*"If you haven't had alcohol or other drug problems, you can't help students with such problems."*

*"If you don't have teenagers at home, you can't really understand them."*

*"You don't like sports! How can you expect to relate to teenagers?"*

**You know, it's a tragedy in a way that Americans are brought up to think that they cannot feel for other people and other beings just because they are different.  
Alice Walker**

As part of a working relationship, differences can be complementary and helpful – as when staff from different disciplines work with and learn from each other.

Differences become a barrier to establishing effective working relationships when negative attitudes are allowed to prevail. Interpersonally, the result generally is conflict and poor communication.

For example, differences in status, skin color, power, orientation, and so forth can cause one or more persons to enter the situation with negative (including competitive) feelings. And such feelings often motivate conflict.

Many individuals (students, staff) who have been treated unfairly, been discriminated against, been deprived of opportunity and status at school, on the job, and in society use whatever means they can to seek redress and sometimes to strike back. Such an individual may promote conflict in hopes of correcting power imbalances or at least to call attention to a problem.

Often, however, power differentials are so institutionalized that individual action has little impact.

It is hard and frustrating to fight an institution.

It is much easier and immediately satisfying to fight with other individuals one sees as representing that institution.

However, when this occurs where individuals are supposed to work together, those with negative feelings may act and say things in ways that produce significant barriers to establishing a working relationship. Often, the underlying message is "you don't understand," or worse yet "you probably don't want to understand." Or, even worse, "you are my enemy."

It is unfortunate when such barriers arise between students and those trying to help them; it is a travesty when such barriers interfere with the helpers working together effectively. Staff conflicts detract from accomplishing goals and contribute in a major way to "burn out."

## Exhibit

### Understanding Barriers to Effective Working Relationships

#### *Barriers to Motivational Readiness*

Efforts to create readiness for change can build consensus but can't mobilize everyone. Some unmobilized individuals simply will not understand proposed changes. More often, those who do not support change are motivated by other considerations.

Individuals who value the current state of affairs and others who don't see the value of proposed changes can be expected to be apathetic and reluctant and perhaps actively resistant from the outset. The same is true for persons who expect that change will undermine their status or make unwanted demands on them. (And as the diffusion process proceeds, the positive motivation of others may subside or may even become negative if their hopes and positive expectations are frustrated or because they find they are unable to perform as other expect them to. This is especially apt to occur when unrealistic expectations have been engendered and not corrected.)

It is a given that individuals who are not highly motivated to work productively with others do not perform as well as they might. This is even more true of individuals with negative attitudes. The latter, of course, are prime candidates for creating and exacerbating problems. It is self-defeating when barriers arise that hinder stakeholders from working together effectively. And conflicts contribute to collaborative failure and burn out.

In encounters with others in an organization, a variety of human, community, and institutional *differences* usually can be expected. Moreover, organizational settings foster an extensive range of interpersonal *dynamics*. Certain dynamics and differences motivate patterns of poor communication, avoidance, and conflict.

#### *Differences & Dynamics*

Differences that may become sources of unproductive working relationships include variations in sociocultural and economic background, current lifestyle, primary language spoken, skin color, gender, power, status, intervention orientation, and on and on. Many individuals (students, parents, staff) who have been treated unfairly, discriminated against, or deprived of opportunity and status at school, on the job, and in society use whatever means they can to seek redress and sometimes to strike back. Such individuals may promote conflict in hopes of correcting long-standing power imbalances or to call attention to other problems. And even when this is not so and even when there are no other serious barriers initially, common dynamics arise as people work together. Examples of interfering dynamics include excessive dependency and approval seeking, competition, stereotypical thinking and judgmental bias, transference and counter-transference, rescue-persecution cycles, resistance, reluctance, and psychological withdrawal.

Differences and dynamics become barriers to effective working relationships with colleagues and clients when they generate negative attitudes that are allowed to prevail. Fortunately, many barriers are preventable and others can be dealt with quickly if appropriate problem solving mechanisms are in place. Thus, a central focus in designing strategies to counter problems involves identifying how to address the motivational barriers to establishing and maintaining productive working relationships.

#### *Reactions to Shifts in Power*

In discussing power, theoreticians distinguish "power over" from "power to" and "power from." *Power over* involves explicit or implicit dominance over others and events; *power to* is seen as increased opportunities to act; *power from* implies ability to resist the power of others.\*

(cont.)

**Exhibit (cont.)**  
**Understanding Barriers to Effective Working Relationships**

Efforts to restructure schools often are designed to extend the idea of "power to" by "empowering" all stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the complexities of *empowerment* have not been well addressed (e.g., distinctions related to its personal and political facets). As practiced, empowerment of some seems to disempower others. That is, empowering one group of stakeholders usually reduces the political power of another. On a personal level, empowering some persons seems to result in others *feeling* disempowered (and thus feeling threatened and pushed or left out). For example, individuals whose position or personal status in an organization has endowed them with power are likely to feel disempowered if their control or influence over activities and information is reduced; others feel disempowered simply by no longer being an "insider" with direct connections to key decision makers. And often, individuals who express honest concerns or doubts about how power is being redistributed may be written off as resistant.\*\*

Another concern arises from the fact that the acquisition of power may precede the ability to use it effectively and wisely. To counter this, stakeholder development is an essential component of empowerment during the diffusion process.

Problems stemming from power shifts may be minimized. The time to begin is during the readiness phase of the diffusion process. Those who are to share power must be engaged in negotiations designed to ease the transition; at the same time, those who will be assuming power must be engaged in specific developmental activity. Ultimately, however, success in countering negative reactions to shifts in power may depend on whether the changes help or interfere with building a sense of community (a sense of relatedness and interdependence).

***Faulty Infrastructure Mechanisms***

Most models for restructuring education call for revamping existing organizational and programmatic infrastructures (e.g., mechanisms for governance, planning and implementation, coordination). Temporary mechanisms also are established to facilitate diffusion (e.g., steering and change teams). A well functioning infrastructure prevents many problems and responds effectively to those that do arise. An early focus of diffusion is on ensuring that the institutionalized and temporary infrastructure mechanisms are appropriately designed and functioning. The work of the change team and those who implement stakeholder development is essential in this regard. Each infrastructure mechanism has a role in building positive working relationships and in anticipating, identifying, and responding to problems quickly. Persons staffing the infrastructure must learn to perform specific functions related to these concerns. Members of the change team must monitor how well the infrastructure is functioning with regard to these concerns and take steps to address deficiencies.

\*In *What's wrong with empowerment (American Journal of Community Psychology, 21)*, S. Riger (1993) notes: "the concept of empowerment is sometimes used in a way that confounds a sense of efficacy or esteem (part of "power to") with that of actual decision-making control over resources ("power over"). Many intervention efforts aimed at empowerment increase people's power to act, for example, by enhancing their self-esteem, but do little to affect their power over resources and policies."

\*\*Riger also cautions: "If empowerment of the disenfranchised is the primary value, then what is to hold together societies made up of different groups? Competition among groups for dominance and control without the simultaneous acknowledgement of common interests can lead to a conflict like we see today in the former Yugoslavia. . . . Does empowerment of disenfranchised people and groups simultaneously bring about a greater sense of community and strengthen the ties that hold our society together, or does it promote certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, increasing competitiveness and lack of cohesion?"

## ***Overcoming Barriers Related to Differences***

When the problem is **only** one of poor skills, it is relatively easy to overcome. Most motivated professionals can be directly taught ways to improve communication and avoid or resolve conflicts that interfere with working relationships.

There are, however, no easy solutions to overcoming deeply embedded negative attitudes. Certainly, a first step is to understand that the nature of the problem is not differences per se but negative perceptions stemming from the politics and psychology of the situation.

It is these perceptions that lead to

(1) prejudgments that a person is bad because of an observed difference

and

(2) the view that there is little to be gained from working with that person.

Thus, minimally, the task of overcoming negative attitudes interfering with a particular working relationship is twofold.

To find ways

(1) to counter negative prejudgments (e.g., to establish the credibility of those who have been prejudged)

and

(2) to demonstrate there is something of value to be gained from working together.

## ***Building Rapport and Connection***

To be effective in working with another person (student, parent, staff), you need to build a positive relationship around the **tasks** at hand.

Necessary ingredients in building a working relationship are

- \* minimizing negative prejudgments about those with whom you will be working
- \* taking time to make connections
- \* identifying what will be gained from the collaboration in terms of mutually desired outcomes -- to clarify the value of working together
- \* enhancing expectations that the working relationship will be productive -- important here is establishing credibility with each other
- \* establishing a structure that provides support and guidance to aid task focus
- \* periodic reminders of the positive outcomes that have resulted from working together

With specific respect to **building relationships** and **effective communication**, three things you can do are:

- \* convey empathy and warmth (e.g., the ability to understand and appreciate what the individual is thinking and feeling and to transmit a sense of liking)
- \* convey genuine regard and respect (e.g., the ability to transmit real interest and to interact in a way that enables the individual to maintain a feeling of integrity and personal control)
- \* talk with, not at, others -- active listening and dialogue (e.g., being a good listener, not being judgmental, not prying, sharing your experiences as appropriate and needed)

Finally, watch out for ego-oriented behavior (yours and theirs) -- it tends to get in the way of accomplishing the task at hand.

## **Accounting for Cultural, Racial, and Other Significant Individual and Group Differences**

See Resources included in the Center's Quick Find on:  
*Diversity, Disparities, and Promoting Equity* --  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/diversity.htm>

Some take aways from the literature:

Those who work with youngsters and their families can better meet the needs of their target population by enhancing their competence with respect to the group and its intragroup differences.

Developing such competence is a dynamic, on-going process -- not a goal or outcome. That is, there is no single activity or event that will enhance such competence. In fact, use of a single activity reinforces a false sense of that the "problem is solved."

Diversity training is widely viewed as important, but is not effective in isolation. Programs should avoid the "quick fix" theory of providing training without follow-up or more concrete management and programmatic changes.

Hiring staff from the same background as the target population does not necessarily ensure the provision of appropriate services, especially if those staff are not in decision-making positions, *or* are not themselves appreciative of, or respectful to, group and intragroup differences.

Establishing a process for enhancing a program's competence with respect to group and intragroup differences is an opportunity for positive organizational and individual growth.

In their discussion of "The Cultural Competence Model," Mason, Benjamin, and Lewis\* outline five cultural competence values which they stress are more concerned with behavior than awareness and sensitivity and should be reflected in staff attitude and practice and the organization's policy and structure. In essence, these five values are

(1) *Valuing Diversity* -- which they suggest is a matter of framing cultural diversity as a strength in clients, line staff, administrative personnel, board membership, and volunteers.

(2) *Conducting Cultural Self-Assessment* -- to be aware of cultural blind spots and ways in which one's values and assumptions may differ from those held by clients.

(3) *Understanding the Dynamics of Difference* -- which they see as the ability to understand what happens when people of different cultural backgrounds interact.

(4) *Incorporating Cultural Knowledge* -- seen as an ongoing process.

(5) *Adapting to Diversity* -- described as modifying direct interventions and the way the organization is run to reflect the contextual realities of a given catchment area and the sociopolitical forces that may have shaped those who live in the area.

\*In *Families and the Mental Health System for Children and Adolescence*, edited by C.A. Heflinger & C.T. Nixon (1996). CA: Sage Publications.

## Stop, Think, Discuss

In most situations, direct or indirect accusations that "*You don't understand*" are valid. Indeed, they are givens. After all, it is usually the case that one does not fully understand complex situations or what others have experienced and are feeling.

With respect to efforts to build working relationships, accusing someone of not understanding tends to create major barriers. This is not surprising since the intent of such accusations generally is to make others uncomfortable and put them on the defensive. It is hard to build positive connections with a defensive person. Avoidance of "*You don't understand*" accusations may be a productive way to reduce at least one set of major barriers to establishing working relationships.

*At this point, what are your ideas about how to maximize good working relationships at your school?*

### *One Other Observation*

Finally, it is essential to remember that **individual differences** are the most fundamental determinant of whether a good relationship is established.