

Linking Cultures

First Steps for Working with Newcomers



Networking for an Inclusive Community

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MEETING AND GREETING

1. When first greeting a client who is a newcomer to Canada, be sensitive to hand-shaking, and personal space. Also, determine the best way to address the newcomer – ask how to pronounce his or her name correctly, and use correct titles.

Different cultures have different practices, and women may have different practices than men. Do not be insulted if the newcomer does not behave as you expect. Try to remember that you are the “face” of your agency or organization. If newcomers get negative feelings from their first encounter, they are unlikely to return.

2. Be aware of your environment. Is it welcoming?

The receptionist may be the first person a newcomer encounters. Try to give this person some simple language phrases to be used to welcome the client (preferably in their own language). Are there physical barriers between you and your newcomer? Try to be aware of the subtle messages you are sending by your stance, attitude and behaviour that might interfere with trust-building. Simple things such as “Welcome” signs in several different languages could make a big difference.

The following resources may be helpful:

“Welcome in 325 Languages”

<http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/welcome.htm>

“Pleased to meet you” in many languages

<http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/meet.htm>

3. Often you will need to engage in some “small talk” before you begin the process of getting to know the newcomer. If a newcomer needs compassion, please take the time to show this. Humour can be an icebreaker but requires some sensitivity in its use. A simple smile can make a difference.

It will be difficult to meet your objectives if the newcomer is not relaxed and ready to process the information you can provide.

4. Assess early on if you will need the services of an interpreter in order to assist the newcomer.

You will need to consider the availability of interpreters, the level of interpretation that might be needed and its significance in the delivery of the service or support. Learning to work with an interpreter takes time. During interviews, focus your attention on the client and not on the interpreter.

Some resources are: **ACFO de London-Sarnia; Across Languages, and London Cross Cultural Learner Centre.**

5. Even though you may have specific duties related to your newcomer clients/employees, it is important that he or she be perceived as a whole person, regardless of where they come from or what you can do for them.

More than 70% of newcomers are well-educated and are used to a fairly high standard of living in their home countries. Avoid stereotypical thinking with regard to country of origin.

6. Most newcomers are capable people, needing only some help in a new country to become independent.

It is important to foster independence. Try to be selective about the services you are offering them.

7. Remember this is only one stop along the life path for the newcomer.

As the newcomer may seek help from many services in the community, try to determine what services they have accessed already and if services similar to yours have already been accessed. As the newcomer prepares to move on to independence or another service provider, try to provide some insight into what they might expect. Other service providers may be more or less experienced in dealing with newcomers.

8. Try to be aware of your own limitations - organizational, personal, physical and mental. Be prepared to ask your colleagues and others for their assistance and support.

Almost one in five persons in Canada comes from another country. In recent years, most newcomers are from Asia (including the Middle East). Try to be sensitive to the possibility that there may be a perceived power relationship between a service provider and a client.

WORKING TOGETHER

1. Be alert to the pre-migration experiences of your newcomer. Consider the positive assets and resources of the newcomer, and his or her existing social networks and support systems.

Determine if the culture of the newcomer is one of “community” or “individual”. If it is community, then you will need to involve his or her support person(s) in the strategy and decision-making process. Even the simplest decisions may require consultation with the support group (who is the “authority” figure in this person's life?).

2. Assess the newcomer according to their past experiences, knowledge and skills, independent of the Canadian norms and his or her grasp of the English language.

Intelligence is not measured by one's ability speak English fluently. Try to assess what level of expertise is required to meet the specific requirements of the task.

3. Building trust takes time. Allow as much time as needed to help newcomers feel comfortable with you before offering information or a service. Reassure the clients that they will still be respected and accepted if they choose to decline the service or program.

Of course, you have your own schedules and deadlines to accommodate, but be aware of the issues involved and try to adjust to your newcomer's needs. Put yourself in their shoes: Think about how you would feel or what you would want to know if you had just moved to China or France as it relates to the task at hand.

4. What does the newcomer want to communicate to you? When your newcomer becomes more comfortable in your presence, do not be afraid to ask questions.

If possible, allow more time for meetings depending on the pace needed for communication. Try to determine what the priorities are for the newcomer. Active listening is your best asset when determining what the newcomer needs. Do not let political correctness become a barrier to establishing vital dialogue. Respect the newcomer's capacity to make his or her own decisions.

5. What do you want to tell them? When providing information, use simple sentence structure, common wording and active language. Be aware of the context of the information you are providing.

Provide information in small bits. Try to give the right information at the right time. Avoid using metaphors, slang, acronyms and idioms. Clarify and rephrase - until you are sure your newcomer understands the information you are trying to provide. Be alert to physical cues that may allow you to determine understanding.

6. Negotiate goals with the newcomer. Set small, achievable goals to start with so the newcomer will gain a sense of accomplishment before tackling some of the bigger objectives.

What seems logical to you may not be so obvious to the newcomer. You could ask, "How is this done where you come from?" If possible, try to adapt the process to one that is more comfortable for the newcomer. Making the newcomer part of the planning will foster independence and build trust. If your first attempts are not successful, do not be afraid to apologize and try something else.

7. Provide explanations for your request of the newcomer.

Give the reason or reasons for doing things "this way". If the information you provide requires a change in perspective or behaviour, try to allow time between visits for the newcomer to process the information.

8. Ask yourself, "What tools can I provide to make life easier for this person?"

Depending on your mandate, you might have a list of resources available in several languages, such as library services, internet sites, city/bus route maps, health centres, or even a list of common vocabulary or job-related words that would be useful for them to learn.

9. From time to time you may recognize the newcomer is not responding in ways you might expect.

Sleeplessness, irritability, anger, depression, anxiety and so on may be evident and may indicate the need to make a referral to a mental health service. The term "mental health" may not be familiar to many newcomers. Also, be aware that just because the newcomer may have been here for several years, he or she may have long-term challenges stemming from past experiences.

10. If it is necessary to refer the newcomer to another agency or service, try to make an "active linking" referral.

The NIC Associates Resource Directory is available through a NIC Associate member at your agency. This resource, and others, should help you in making contact with the best source of help for the newcomer. If possible, "take them, don't send them".

SPECIAL CONCERNS IF YOU ARE A SUPPORT WORKER

1. Define your boundaries.

Please take the time at the beginning to explain clearly to the newcomer what services you are able to provide. You will need to clarify that there is a beginning and an end to the service, keeping in mind that deadlines can be fluid. Maintain a professional relationship - if the newcomer comes to view you as a friend, he or she may experience a loss when it is time to move on.

2. Some newcomers find group interventions helpful; others prefer one-on-one support.

Even if a group setting is desirable, you may have to first make a one-on-one connection for the newcomer with someone within the group so that they do not feel like an "outsider". Peer helpers are a valuable resource.

3. From time to time the newcomer might have questions or concerns about their immigration status or sponsorship. These are complicated issues.

Unless this is your area of expertise, the best advice you can give them is never to lie on any forms or to any immigration person, no matter how unsettling the truth may be. You might also tell them there is a lot of misinformation on these topics available from well-intentioned family and friends. You might want to suggest some trusted information sources on the internet, such as:

London Cross Cultural Learning Centre

http://www.lccl.org/settlement_counselling.html);

Citizenship and Immigration

(<http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/english/>)

4. Do not assume everyone's immigration experience is the same.

Speaking the same language does not mean shared experiences. For example, even though the newcomers you may meet all speak Spanish, they may be from different countries. As a result they will have different cultures and experiences.

5. Ask the newcomer to provide an evaluation of the service you have provided.

Over time, the number of newcomers settling in Canada will increase. Changes in how we conduct business in a diverse and inclusive world will be necessary. Knowing what is working, and what is not, is valuable information, especially when applying for grant-funding.

SPECIAL CONCERNS - IF YOU WORK WITH CHILDREN/FAMILIES

1. Parenting is a skill.

No-one is born knowing how to be a good parent. Parenting styles are often learned from your own parents and from societal norms. For newcomers, parental supports may not be readily available, and local community norms will be foreign to them. Parenting courses are valuable resources.

2. Facilitating communication within families is very important.

Common concerns expressed by newcomer parents are around the loss of language, disrespect, changing value systems, and safety issues. For children, these concerns are around a sense of belonging, bullying and discrimination; increased responsibilities at home, differing expectations, and role conflict. Collaterals (teachers, family members, peers) can be very valuable in making the transition to a new culture.

3. Be sensitive to misinterpreting behaviour.

Culturally different behaviour is not the same as a behaviour disorder. If a situation arises, clarify what happened and how it was interpreted by the parties involved before making a judgement.

4. Try to become familiar with broad cultural norms around parenting styles.

Consider different world views as they relate to child safety, expressing love, concepts of discipline and punishment, and different interpretation of time.

5. Become familiar with the differences between discipline and punishment.

Discipline and punishment often mean the same thing in other languages. In Canada, discipline is guiding in a positive manner as opposed to punishment that has negative consequences. Take time to explain the differences.

6. Mentors are a valuable resource.

For newcomer children and adolescents, “not fitting in” is one of the most predominant fears. Negotiating with the school to provide a mentor may be a positive solution both for the youth and the parents. Places of worship may also be a source of mentors. Settlement workers are often available in schools and can be a valuable resource for families.

7. Some valuable web resources:

www.parentsmatter.ca; www.cwlc.ca/en/projects/ppes;
www.attachmentcrosscultures.org/research/
www.chestnutpublishing.com;
www.canadianimmigrant.ca/settlingincanada/parenting;
www.childreach.on.ca; www.settlement.org/; www.camh.net;
www.serc.mb.ca/SERC

YOUR ORGANIZATION

1. Encourage the availability of diversity and inclusivity workshops.

Canada's demography is changing constantly. In order to provide the best services for newcomers, organizations should provide access for all employees to diversity and inclusivity training/workshops/events as often as possible. One session is not enough to cover this complicated topic.

2. Encourage your agency or organization to provide some basic training for those working in the reception area.

Make a positive first impression. The effort to greet the newcomer in his or her own language may be a big step in gaining trust. A few common words or phrases in the languages appropriate to your clientele are all that are needed. Two resources are:

"Welcome in 325 Languages"

<http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/welcome.htm>

"Pleased to meet you" in many languages

<http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/meet.htm>

3. If your agency is open to it, include an outreach component in your service to newcomers. This could include simply varying your opening hours to accommodate other family members' attendance and so on.

For example, if the service you provide requires complicated travel **from your newcomer's point-of-view**, try to take the service to the newcomer, at least until the newcomer is more comfortable. If the newcomer feels unsafe leaving home, the first step is to reach out to them in his or her own environment.

4. Networking and collaboration among agencies is important.

Although each agency has its own mandate, much can be gained by "informal" networking and collaboration efforts, in order to serve the newcomer holistically. Make use of the NIC Resource Directory to make contacts.

5. If possible, stretch credentials for hiring.

Those from other countries may not have the Canadian credentials required for a paid or volunteer position at your agency. However, they may have valuable life experience that could be useful to you. Credentials can be developed and earned over time. You might also consider providing job mentoring and apprenticeship opportunities.

6. Provide volunteer opportunities.

Involving newcomers in events and activities as volunteers will give them Canadian experience and contribute to a sense of belonging.

7. Be alert to helper fatigue.

Use stress reduction and other strategies - setting appropriate boundaries, eating regular meals and exercising - when you become aware that you or someone in your organization may be burning out.

8. Even though you may have little influence in the way your organization operates, you should reflect on the following and see if there is a potential for advocacy.

- A.** Does your organization recognize the value of newcomers to the community and the economy, and does staff training reflect the concepts of both diversity and inclusivity?
- B.** Is counselling available for all staff members to address issues such as overload and job-related stress?

ABOUT NETWORKING FOR AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY (NIC)

NIC is an informal network of interested individuals who are working to improve communication among agencies, business, industry and individuals in order to facilitate a more inclusive community for refugees and immigrants. General Membership meetings are held three times each year. There are no membership fees to belong to this network. NIC is directed by a Steering Committee comprised of eight to 10 representatives from service organizations.

NIC provides an email network, NIC Connect, for all members in order to facilitate the sharing of information about up-coming events, the search for assistance for newcomers, and other relevant requests.

NIC provides a **Resource Directory** to permit Associate members to contact one another more easily if they have questions or referrals related to working with newcomers. This directory provides information on programs available by each member agency, and specialized services provided by agencies and individuals.

The Linking Cultures Course is an introductory course that provides service providers, human resources personnel, small-business managers, students and community members with culturally based skills and knowledge to assist newcomers to Canada in building support networks, gaining meaningful employment and working towards their goals. The course provides in-depth information, exercises and resources on a variety of topics, such as diversity, pre-migration issues, communication, barriers to access, building trust, families, legal issues, and health and wellness.

The Linking Cultures Course is offered in collaboration Fanshawe College in the spring of each year. Please refer to the **Fanshawe Course Calendar** for more information.

The information provided in this “First Steps” brochure was developed from the Linking Cultures Course. It is not meant to replace the course but to facilitate better day-to-day practices.

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