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Welcoming Diversity?

Ten years ago I was hired to develop a bilingual education program that would engage Latino students in environmental issues in ways that lessened their sense of alienation from school and fostered their self-esteem as individuals and members of the community. The Bilingual Environmental Education Program became very successful, offering field science and interactive learning activities about global environmental issues such as ocean pollution and deforestation that link the United States, Mexico, Central America, and South America. The program was available on a sliding-fee basis, to educate and empower school children, families, and adults. It opened a window of opportunity for thousands of Spanish-speaking children; during the program's first five years, over 14,000 students participated.

Three years ago, our parent organization shifted its focus from environmental education to promoting sustainable development in the Pacific Rim and neighboring countries. It also relocated out of our area. Without a sponsor, our program's agreement with the National Park Service to serve the local community would lapse and we would have to leave our beautiful park setting. Since the park was a wonderful learning resource, our parent organization helped us find another well-respected environmental group located in the same area that might be able to absorb our program.

Nature's Fund had worked primarily with white, upper middle income school groups. The fund operated on the sound business principle of remaining self-sustaining, largely through full tuition and fees; however, this meant that many culturally diverse and low-income school groups did not have access to the quality programs they offered. The previous year this organization had received a \$1 million grant earmarked for a diversity initiative that would provide environmental education to a greater cross-section of the San Francisco Bay Area's student population, particularly those from underserved communities.

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The match seemed almost perfect but the transition was not an easy process. From the start there were conflicting signals. On the one hand, the executive director seemed enthusiastic about this new collaboration. On the other hand, his board of directors, the education and outreach director, and the organization's president were not so sure this was the right move for them.

The negotiations seemed to drag on and on. Nature's Fund kept demanding more and more paperwork that seemed unrelated to the workings of the program. I began to wonder whether the organization was afraid of the unknown and uncomfortable being around people who looked different from them. I knew the board of directors and the fund's staff were concerned about my program's global focus and its emphasis on advocacy. Maybe they were also not really ready for the student population my program was serving.

When the executive director resigned six months after we initiated our first conversation, I thought that was the end of the negotiations. Without his support I didn't see how this transition was going to succeed. But I knew that in the highly diverse Bay Area this organization needed my program, and I wanted to help them provide environmental education to underserved school children. So many hours were spent trying to convince them that this program was really suitable for them.

After almost a year of negotiating, an agreement was reached and I became the first Latina (and the first non-white person) to hold a management position in the organization's 20-year history. Michael, a bilingual white male, came with me to help staff the program. Michael was committed to bringing environmental education to Latinos who because of language barriers would not ordinarily have access to the type of learning we offered.

Despite all the energy consumed by the lengthy negotiations, all the obstacles, and the probable bias, I was still excited about working for this well-respected organization. With their diversity initiative and extensive resources, I continued to feel that this was a perfect match. But I also knew coming to work here was going to be a challenging experience. Michael and I were given the smallest office in the building with a single desk and one phone line for the two of us. I brought in my own computer, chairs, table, and bookshelves.

After a few months, I noticed that many things were not as I expected them to be. Some of the staff were pleasant enough, but there were others who were openly hostile. I saw little or no interest in my program or in serving low-income children. The staff and administrators could not relate to them. They were more interested in the amount of money our program could generate than in the number of school children we could reach. For example, my supervisor wanted me to charge the same fee they were charging their regular school groups. When I explained that underserved kids could not pay that much, he answered that part of my and Michael's salaries had to be covered by those fees. He and other senior staff didn't understand why "those groups" couldn't pay their fees.

I soon found that my supervisor wanted to micromanage my job. He wanted to see every piece of work-related correspondence before I mailed it, and he wanted to sign it as well. He did that with no other director. I am a well-qualified professional. I have a teaching credential, a master's degree in education, and I am also bilingual in English and Spanish. I brought an educational background, knowledge, and teaching experience – not to mention a lot of experience and personal connections within the local community – that no one else in the organization had, not even the new executive director who, as the former outreach director, had taken a dim view of this collaboration from the start.

It seemed that the diversity initiative at Nature's Fund existed only in words, not in action. I am friendly by nature and used to come in saying good morning to everyone, but I soon felt that morning greetings must not be part of the organization's culture. The staff was very indifferent, very cold. I felt that they neither trusted me nor believed in my program's worth. I began to feel isolated, so the only person I felt comfortable communicating with was Michael. He was practically my only ally.

After working at Nature's Fund for about nine months, a major incident occurred that convinced me the match was not what I had hoped for. We often had problems with our computer and one day Michael called Alice, the program director who was also the tech support person, for help. I was in our office when she came in. Michael and I greeted her and thanked her for coming to help. She immediately asked, "What is the problem?" Michael explained the difficulty he was having. She leaned over, hit a few keys on the keyboard, and fixed the

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problem. Michael said to me in Spanish, “Rosa, qué tonto soy. Esto era una simple tontería” (Rosa, how dumb I am! This was something really easy to fix). I responded, “Qué pena haberla llamado para que viniera a reparar una simple tontería” (How embarrassing to have called her for something so simple to fix). Alice, who had previously mentioned that she knew some Spanish, reacted to our brief exchange by getting upset and began literally screaming at me. I was disrespectful, she said, how dare I speak in a language that she did not understand!

I was astounded, completely bewildered by her outburst. She knew that Michael occasionally spoke Spanish around the office, saying “Hola” or “Hasta mañana” to other employees. I knew there was nothing wrong with our speaking Spanish in my office, but I didn’t want to have a confrontation with this person. Instead I immediately apologized to her. But nothing I said would placate this woman. Still furious, she declared that I was rude to her. It is interesting that even though it was my assistant, a white male, who initiated the Spanish conversation, she chose me to vent her rage on.

Concerned about the incident, I talked with the executive director. After I told him what occurred in my office, he said, “Yes, Alice talked to me already. You know she doesn’t speak Spanish. She felt offended and disrespected by you. I think I understand how she felt. You should apologize to her.” I answered that I already had. He repeated that I had to understand that Alice felt offended by me. His attitude was judgmental instead of objective. He didn’t listen to me and I felt he was not supportive.

I left his office feeling devastated and frustrated. His lack of interest in resolving this unfortunate situation shocked me. I did not want to spend my time trying to make them accept me. The whole situation did not seem possible. I saw myself oppressed, alienated, and unfairly treated. I felt there was a lot of prejudice and racism in this “wonderful environmental organization” that had created an initiative purportedly “to embrace diversity.” I went to my office and tears came to my eyes. I felt that I was the one who had been disrespected. I felt I could not continue working for this organization any longer. It was time to find another job.

Welcoming Diversity?

“Welcoming Diversity?” is written with a level of clarity and honesty about the world of diversity that engages the reader right from the beginning. The case starts by pointing out a current reality: the sense of alienation that lives in the hearts of many Latino students. Rosa, the environmental educator and author, recognizes that an environmental education (EE) program is a way to lessen that alienation. Working on environmental issues can move communities towards integration and unity and give individuals a sense of belonging. This social aspect of EE programs is not emphasized enough or used often as a strategy in working with culturally diverse communities. Yet the accomplishments of Rosa’s program are evident in its ability to reach 14,000 students in only five years. This achievement affirms the type of success that an EE program with a social approach can have.

Rosa was aware that Nature’s Fund “worked primarily with white, upper middle income school groups” and that her experience and program would greatly help the organization’s diversity initiative. In the environmental education field, professionals who have never experienced diversity issues firsthand are too often placed in charge of developing solutions for those who have.

Initially it seemed to Rosa that Nature’s Fund recognized her background and experience as an asset that could help them avoid a “colonialist” approach. But at the same time, Nature’s Fund failed to recognize the inherent unfairness of limiting students’ exposure to environmental education by their ability to pay.

Through her story, Rosa unveils deep cultural differences towards work. In Latin America, workers often do not have even the basic tools needed for their jobs, but here, in the United States, this is the exception more than the rule. When Rosa found herself in cramped quarters with few resources, she did not make an issue out of the situation. Instead she showed her willingness to support the organization and her allegiance and commitment to their common work. Could her colleagues have read that behavior as lack of assertiveness instead? Could this have added to their doubts about her work?

The differences in work “manners” are clearly described by Rosa. In Latin America, work is in a way an extension of family life. Greetings, hallway chats, and birthday celebrations are part of work “manners,” whereas a greeting when you are busy in America can be considered an interruption or even rude. Unfortunately no one in Rosa’s case

showed understanding of these differences. As environmental educators we constantly encounter not only racial and cultural differences but also differences in perceptions about the environment that may or may not be related to cultural or racial issues. Acknowledging differences and the uneasiness they infuse into our professional work and relationships and keeping one's mind open may be a key step towards improving the environmental education field.

COMMENTATOR ISABEL CASTILLO specializes in developing participatory processes and strategies for environmental education programs. She founded and created the curriculum for Centro de Desarrollo Pequeño Sol, an elementary and middle school in Mexico. Ms. Castillo also developed a strategy to promote the creation of EE regional groups in Mexico and created guides and a process to adapt the *World Resources Institute Teacher's Guide* for use in Latin America. She is currently designing an EE strategy to help conserve agrobiodiversity and traditional agriculture in a Quechua indigenous community in Cotacachi, Ecuador.

Facilitation Notes

Welcoming Diversity?

A successful bilingual environmental education program loses its sponsoring agency and becomes affiliated with another large agency. The director of the program is the first non-white person to hold a management position within the new agency. Although the new agency has a recently funded diversity initiative, making this a “good match” in theory, the author does not feel that she or her program is welcomed or accepted. This case speaks to issues of cultural competency, clear communications, and respect. It asks what an organization should do to successfully assimilate new staff as well as prepare existing staff for working with those from differing cultural and ethnic groups.

How do group dynamics contribute to the problem described in the case?

Most people who discussed this case wanted to know three things: how much do individual personality and communication styles contribute to the problem; why was the staff so threatened by Rosa (was it her style, knowledge base, or clients she served); and what role does language have in creating tension? Though we can't find evidence for answering these questions, discussion about some of the more general issues proved interesting. Status and credentials affect group dynamics in general, and in this case it is fruitful to examine how self-perception may have impacted the interaction of those

involved. Could the differences in cultures between Rosa and her new colleagues have been a contributing factor? Was it a matter of personal style, training, roles, or some combination that created disharmony?

How can a manager successfully integrate new members into a working group?

For a group to be able to function effectively and efficiently, members usually need to hold a common vision. How does that vision get created? In this case, discussants wondered whose vision it was that framed the work and whether it was shared. As we find ourselves in more and more collaborative working groups, we notice that different norms exist for each of these groups. It seemed clear that the Nature’s Fund staff had a group norm prior to Rosa’s addition to the organization. What could have been done to ease Rosa’s introduction to the group? Should the stage have been set for discussions and agreements on ways of working together when Rosa was hired, and, if so, what might have been some strategies for doing that? Should the Executive Director have mediated and helped to establish better relationships once he was aware of the problem – and, again, what might be some strategies? Whose responsibility is it to train new members of a group in the already established group norms, or do the norms need to be changed when the group configuration is altered? Sharing the expectations and needs of each member of a group is also helpful when it may later be necessary for

diverse viewpoints to be integrated into a group decision; but when and how does this get accomplished so that no one is alienated?

What is the role of reflective practice for professional working groups?

As we get to know our colleagues better – both professionally and personally – our understanding of “where they are coming from” usually becomes clear and our ability to work together is enhanced. But how do we ensure that the groups we are part of continue to improve their working relationships and productivity? In this case, we do not know what (if anything) the Nature’s Fund staff has done to grow as a group and learn from their practice. What kinds of activities could/should they have engaged in as a group to make sure that they continually refined their methods, increased their self-knowledge, and added to their knowledge of others different from them? How does a group plan for including formal debriefing and reflection activities as part of a way of working together, and then how does it go about making those sessions most productive?

Walking in someone else’s shoes

Most of the discussion groups wanted to begin with a focus on roles, attitude, and actions/inactions from Rosa’s point of view, but it is also important to look at the situation from the perspective of the Nature’s Fund staff. Role-playing is often a particularly useful technique for highlighting different perspectives. In discussing this

case, after identifying and discussing the key issues, five participants can be asked to respond to questions by playing the roles of Rosa, Michael, Alice, the Executive Director, and one other member of the staff, while several other participants can be asked to play the roles of outside consultants. Two separate scenarios can be created: in the first, the facilitator asks everyone to go back to when the initial decision was made to include the bilingual environmental education program within Nature's Fund. Rosa, Michael, Alice, the Executive Director, and the staff member should be asked about their expectations. The consultants then

provide some guidance to the assembled parties about how to mold this new situation into a good working relationship that would benefit all – including the clients. In the second scenario, the parties are asked to put themselves at the point where the written case ends and to talk about next steps. This role-playing activity can prove to be enlightening, moving the discussion from “he should have, she should have” to a more general application of good practice. The conversation can then naturally shift to a discussion of what participants learned from this case that will impact their own work.