

Cultivating Culturally Competent HR Practices

A Toolkit for Human Resources Professionals



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Cultivating Culturally Competent HR Practices: A Toolkit

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Introduction

Now more than ever, it is critical that human resources professionals view their roles and responsibilities through a culturally competent lens. At The Winters Group, we define *cultural competence* as a continuous learning process to develop knowledge, acceptance, and skills; the ability to discern cultural patterns in one's own and other cultures, and effectively incorporate different worldviews into problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution. By definition, *culture* refers to shared values, beliefs, and practices, and the behavioral interpretation of how a group lives out its values in order to survive and thrive. To that end, culture can be influenced by varying aspects of our identities.

Whether one is a Talent Acquisition leader, Human Resources Generalist, or in another area of HR, it is imperative to cultivate cultural competence in the execution of people practices and policies. Simply put, cultural competence is the “how” in fostering inclusion, and requisite to “*making it real*” within organizations. This toolkit serves as a “start point” for considering and furthering strides toward creating an equitable work environment for all—and cultivating cultural competence in how human resources professionals communicate, recruit, and engage.

How We Communicate

Language is powerful. Often, whether intentionally or otherwise, organizations communicate messages that exclude or further marginalize the identities of individuals from historically underrepresented groups. Human resources leaders and professionals are critical stakeholders in creating a culture where people within the organization feel supported, protected and included, and this starts with the language used when communicating with, and about employees (e.g. interpersonal conversations, corporate communications, policies & procedures).

Below are some commonly used terms and phrases that impede strides toward inclusion, each accompanied with associated challenges and alternative, culturally competent language to consider.

Commonly Used Phrases	Associated Challenge	Alternatives/Considerations
“Organizational and/or Cultural Fit”	Assumes there is a specific type of person that will “fit” the role, rather than an invitation to “add” one’s own unique knowledge, skills, culture, and abilities to enhance the role. Cultural and organizational “fit” may also be associated with an expectation of <i>assimilation</i> into the dominant/organization’s culture—rather than an invitation to be part of <i>building</i> the culture.	“Organizational Add” “Cultural Add”
“Top Schools” for “Top Talent”	Typically used to refer to predominantly white institutions (PWI). This can be interpreted as code for focusing recruitment efforts solely on those schools and perpetuating a norm that suggests the most equipped and capable students/candidates are only educated within those institutions.	“Target Schools” Actively include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUS), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), and Community Colleges in your strategy
A “Diverse” Candidate or Hire	Typically used to refer to a candidate or an individual who is a person of color, woman, or a member of another underrepresented group, but can also “ <i>other</i> ” those who are part of these groups. Technically, all employees are “diverse” in comparison to one another as we are a sum of our intersecting identities. Groups are diverse—a candidate <u>pool</u> or a new hire <u>class</u> can be “diverse.”	NAME the diversity of which you are referring: “We want to ensure a person of color is part of the slate.”
“Executive Presence”	A term that traditionally refers to characteristics and standards associated with dominant (white, male) cultural norms and may not take into account cross-cultural differences (communication style, appearance, gravitas, emotional expressiveness, etc.)	Be critical of how your organization defines executive presence by considering cultural patterns that exist among different groups, particularly those underrepresented in leadership.
“You Guys”	An informal colloquialism that assigns masculinity to a broader group— <i>imagine referring to a group as “you gals.”</i> The workplace and many teams consist of individuals with varying gender	“You ALL” “Everyone” “The team”

	identities and expressions, many of whom may not be or identify with “guys.”	
“Pow Wow”	Definitionally, a “pow wow” is a North American Indian ceremony. The use of this term to describe a meeting could be viewed as culturally insensitive.	“Meeting” “Gathering” “Check-In”
Standing Meeting	Inherently exclusive of those with varying ability statuses, particularly those who may use a wheelchair or are unable to stand.	“Quick Meeting” “Team Huddle” “Check-In”

How We Recruit

Talent acquisition and recruitment professionals are commonly referred to as “gatekeepers” of the organizational culture, as they are typically the candidates’ first interaction within an organization. Recruiting candidates that reflect the diverse representation of the organization’s surrounding community and labor force is more often than not the goal. Part of accomplishing this goal involves communicating evidence of an inclusive work environment in job descriptions and fostering culturally competent interview practices. Below are some helpful tips that focus on three components of the hiring process.

Job Descriptions

Consider:

- Limiting your job requirements to “must-haves” to broaden your candidate pool.
- Using diversity & inclusion language/expectations in your job descriptions (e.g. *“proven ability to work successfully with diverse populations and demonstrated commitment to promote and enhance diversity and inclusion.”*).
- Formally communicating your organization-wide commitment to D&I.
- Including flexibility in requirements to give latitude for transferable skills (e.g. 7-10 years of marketing experience in *retail* vs. “grocery retail”).
- Avoiding gender-coded words (such as aggressive, assertive, dominant), and pronouns such as “he or she.” Instead, use descriptors more inclusive of different sexes and genders like “this person,” “the successful candidate” or “they.”

Candidate Sourcing

Consider:

- Striving for the “Rooney Rule,” the National Football League policy that requires teams to interview members of historically underrepresented groups for coaching and senior administrative jobs: the pool of candidates interviewed should include at least one woman and one member of an underrepresented racial group.
- Partnering with a diversity-focused organization, education institutions (HBCUs, HSIs) or search firms.
- Leveraging the networks, professional associations, societies, and programs of historically underrepresented groups.
- Actively soliciting referrals from existing employees who represent historically underrepresented groups.
- Advertising for candidates in non-traditional mediums such as different religious, cultural and ethnic publications, websites, blogs, etc.

Candidate Evaluation

Consider:

- Encouraging recruiters to complete an unconscious bias & cultural competence educational session, and complete implicit association tests for greater self-understanding.
 - Link: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html>
- Inviting job candidates to write a one-page solution to a problem that involves a diversity challenge at work. For example, *how would the candidate balance encouraging employees to bring their whole selves to work vs. assimilating to the company culture?*
- Removing information from candidate bios or resumes that are likely to invite bias (name, age, race, gender, national identity, address, school, etc.).
- Leveraging diverse reviewer panels, as opposed to one-on-one interviewers.

How We Engage

Functional areas (e.g. benefits, total rewards, onboarding, employee relations) must also be executed using a culturally competent lens. Otherwise, policies and procedures run the risk of excluding individuals who are from non-dominant or historically underrepresented groups.

A culturally competent lens starts with HR professionals asking questions like:

- Does this policy or practice inherently privilege some groups over others?

- Who benefits from this policy most? Who benefits the least? Why?
- Could there be different behavioral interpretations of these policies and/or practices that are influenced by cultural differences?
- What conclusions can we draw from employee data and insight surveys regarding how employees experience and perceive our policies and practices? What themes or differences exist across demographic groups?

HR professionals can also make an impact and influence culturally competent practices in much “simpler” ways.

- Consider:
 - Developing policies with gender neutral pronouns.
 - Presenting gender-neutral apparel and uniform selections. For example, rather than referring to a t-shirt as men’s or women’s, describe the cut of the t-shirt.
 - Formalizing inclusive meeting practices that can be socialized and implemented among people managers (e.g. norms for rotating note-taking, distributing agendas ahead of time, affirming and recognizing contributions).
 - Including restroom signs that create space for gender non-conforming individuals to use the restroom that most aligns with their gender identity or expression.

In essence, HR professionals will always play a significant role in fostering a culture of inclusion. If the organization’s goal is to cultivate a culture where differences are valued and employees are able to be their “best selves,” then it is necessary for HR professionals to be critical of and act on people policies and practices that impede those efforts. Inclusion can only manifest where there are intentional efforts to develop and foster cultural competence.