



Cheryl Cook

COMMUNITY BUILDING TRAINER
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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“I don’t do diversity,” Cheryl Cook says simply. Rather, what Cook strives for in her work with community organizations is cultural competence—an approach that emphasizes the differences between people rather than creates generalizations.

“Generalizations are dangerous. They cause us not to really deal with people but to try to put them in boxes,” Cook says. “Programs in diversity, sensitivity, awareness . . . categorize people and deal in definites. It is better to gain an understanding about the differences in people.”

Effecting change in communities and bringing people together is Cook’s passion. She juggles the many components of her life with adeptness and allows each to inform the others: her day job as the director of the online performance measurement system at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, her work with community groups across the country, and her studies at the Howard University School of Divinity. She’s also entering the PhD program at the Center for Conflict Resolution at George Mason University next year. All of these efforts, combined with her personal experience as an African-American woman growing up in both Rhode Island and Virginia, have caused her to formulate an approach to adult learning that embraces not only the learner but the environment, and that often challenges participants’ comfort levels.

Cook often works with community groups that have divided into factions and find themselves at odds. In training for cultural competence, she favors scenarios and role playing as training techniques as she attempts to get at such difficult issues as poverty, prejudice, and power. “Role playing and interactive group activities allow participants to learn from what they are experiencing as they act out issues that are relevant and timely.” To craft the scenarios, Cook develops her workshops based on honest conversations with her clients, urging them to identify both positive and negative factors as they describe the environment. She also does her own reconnaissance of the landscape, visiting a local library or coffee shop to converse casually with patrons.

Equally vital to the success of a workshop is the makeup of the audience. “I encourage my clients to recruit for inclusiveness, to make sure that participants represent a true cross section of the affected group,” Cook says.

Adult learners, Cook emphasizes, “are professionals with life experiences. You must respect that fact, and work within those parameters. Cultural competence inspires and promotes communities of learning and practice, and helps us to grow social capital within our companies and our communities. It is very worthwhile work.”

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