

"Talking the Talk" and "Walking the Walk:" Strategies to Enhance Intercultural Communication

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Article:

The population of the United States is becoming more culturally diverse each day. Of the over 284 million people in our total population, almost 20% are ethnic minorities. It is predicted that if current trends continue, Americans 65 years old and over will make up 20% of the population by the year 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Additionally, about 1 in 5 Americans have some type of disability, and 1 in 10 have a severe disability (U.S. Census Brief, 1997). North Carolina paints a similar picture. Of the over 8 million people residing in NC, 70% are white (a decrease from 72% in 1990), while African-Americans remained steady at about 22% of the population. Most striking is the fact that the Hispanic/Latino population surged 394%, accounting for 4.75% of our residents compared to 1.2% in 1990. The number of North Carolinians who identified themselves as "only Asian" or "Asian and another race" increased 173%. NC also has the seventh-largest American-Indian population in the nation. Twelve percent of NC residents are 65 years of age or older (an increase of over 21% since 1990), while 75 year olds and older increased 36%, and 85 year olds and older grew even faster to 53% during that same decade. In addition, more than 29% of NC residents are non-institutionalized persons with disabilities, and 8% speak a language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Communication is a process of exchange and interaction directed at conveying meaning and achieving understanding. It is a process of sharing information, thoughts, ideas or feelings with another person (Jordan, 2001). When people communicate, their verbal and nonverbal signals are influenced by their experiences and by their cultural backgrounds. People from the same culture by definition are more likely to have similar backgrounds and experiences and are more likely to interpret each other's words and actions accurately. However, even under ideal conditions, the message the receiver decodes is never identical to the message the sender transmits. Cultural differences greatly increase the chances that messages received will differ from messages sent.

Intercultural communication occurs any time the communication process is initiated by an individual who holds one set of cultural beliefs and is received by an individual who holds a different set of cultural beliefs (Jordan, 2001). Intercultural communication occurs between men and women, young people and older adults, as well as people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Park and recreation professionals communicate with supervisors, peers, participants, and the general public on a daily basis. We communicate to create and maintain relationships, persuade others, manage conflicts and behaviors, and implement and evaluate our programs. Effective communication can be the difference between participants having a pleasurable recreation experience or an unpleasurable one. Park and recreation professionals must, therefore, make an effort to learn about different cultures and effective intercultural communication skills.

Three types of communication are commonly present in recreation settings, including verbal, nonverbal, and written communication. Verbal communication includes things said to others, such as attempting to persuade or influence clients to participate in recreation activities, inform others about policies, upcoming events, or how to play a game. Nonverbal communication includes visual information sent without the use of words. Most communicated messages are nonverbal; in fact, up to 80% of communication is nonverbal and includes facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, proximity, touch, or chronemics (use of time). In the provision of recreation services, nonverbal communication may be used for impression management, to regulate communication, provide feedback, repeat or emphasize a verbal message, act as a substitution for words, and to

indicate membership (Jordan, 2001). Written communication might include promotional materials (e.g., signage, flyers, public service announcements), business letters (e.g., to sponsors, parents, etc.), and reports (e.g., accident/incident reports, and client progress reports).

Successful intercultural communication is not always easily achieved. Obstacles to effective intercultural communication in recreation settings can be related to many factors, such as attitudes, differences in perception, ethnocentrism, cultural differences, and ineffective listening. As far as attitudes are concerned, children are influenced by their parents, teachers, and peers from an early age to respond positively or negatively towards a person who is considered "different." Some people may be uncomfortable with differences based on these influences and may refuse to understand and recognize the viewpoints of others.

The perceptions we have about a person from a different cultural group may also influence our communication with that person. This could be due to a person's background and experiences. The recreation specialist who only sees or hears what he/she wants to may appear indifferent and unreceptive to clients from different cultures.

Ethnocentrism occurs when one cultural group measures the words or behaviors of another group against their own cultural standards without first attempting to understand the true intended meaning. Cultural differences may influence the meaning that different individuals attach to certain concepts. Words and symbols mean different things to different people. This may occur when recreation service providers are not prepared or willing to view something from the perspective of someone else's culture.

Finally, ineffective listening can be one of the greatest obstacles to effective intercultural communication. The effective listener will attempt to determine the real message of the sender who belongs to a different cultural group. This listening skill will require "getting inside the sender's point of view" (Van der Lind, 1997).

It is impossible to know the communication patterns and practices of all cultural groups that you will encounter. However, following are a few strategies to assist you in developing more effective intercultural communication skills:

- Examine your personal verbal, nonverbal, and written language for inclusiveness (e.g., both sexes, people with disabilities, people of color, and people of various ages). Before you can begin to understand and help individuals and families from other cultures, you need to examine your own values, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices.
- Study the native language of populations you serve. If learning the language is impossible, it is important to learn some basic skills in verbal and nonverbal intercultural communication. Determine whether a family member speaks English or try to find a staff member who knows the client's language. Working with the client and family to learn a few key words and phrases will not only aid communication but also demonstrate a sincere interest in the family and their culture. When possible, use an interpreter to ease communication with non-English-speaking clients and their family members. However, never use a child (e.g., client's son or daughter) as an interpreter. A child may not have the vocabulary or understanding necessary to accurately translate information (Meadows, 1991).
- Ask clients how they wish to be addressed. While it is important to show interest and warmth when interacting with clients, too friendly or casual a manner may be interpreted as intrusive. In many non-Western cultures, calling an elderly person by his or her first name is considered rude. Asking how a client wishes to be addressed conveys respect and concern.
- Be sensitive to nonverbal communication differences, including eye contact, facial expression, gestures, touch, and use of personal space which people from different cultures may interpret differently. For example,

Native Americans or Southeast Asians may view touching as an intrusion into their personal space. They may also consider it discourteous to make direct eye contact or stand too close to someone during conversations (Grossman, 1994).

- Review all media, office, and promotional materials to ensure representation of all of your clients (Jordan, 2001). If possible, try to develop materials in the client's native language that reinforce your practices and directions.
- Reinforce verbal interactions with visual tools such as pictures or videotapes of someone performing the activity. Always let clients know where or how they can obtain additional help with instructions.
- Employ a positive tone of voice that conveys your interest in the client. Never be condescending, patronizing, or speak loudly, as if the client cannot hear.
- Avoid negative terminology that devalues persons with disabilities such as "psycho," "retard," "cripple," and "deaf and dumb." The use of these words signifies that people with disabilities are incapable and unworthy of valued recreation experiences (Datillo & Smith, 1990).

Effective communication skills are absolutely essential to ensure successful recreational pursuits for our clients. The success or failure of almost any recreation pursuit depends to a large extent on effective communication between the client and the recreation service provider. Park and recreation professionals must be cognizant of cultural tendencies that could pose possible barriers to recreation participation while remaining aware that each client is a unique individual. A rich repertoire of verbal and nonverbal communication skills and behaviors appropriate to intercultural situations as well as emotional capabilities to react in a sensitive manner to fellow communicators from other cultures are definite necessities. We must demonstrate that we respect our clients as individuals, thus facilitating optimal client outcomes and satisfaction with the services provided. Most importantly, these practices will serve our ultimate goal of providing quality recreational services to ALL our clients.

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