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The ability to value diversity requires extensive, ongoing learning experiences

Culturally proficient educators continuously assess school policies, systems, and procedures to determine if they favor some groups over others. When educators discover inequities, they transform the policy or practice to be more culturally responsive. This assessment is not limited to instruction, support services, and parent involvement, but also includes other aspects such as hiring, retention, and supervision of personnel. Aware that culture affects everything in the work environment, culturally responsive educators scrutinize activities that are easily taken for granted, such as the job interview. In most schools, unfortunately, inequities in these areas go undetected, as the following example illustrates.

Two women interviewed for a position at a school with a predominantly white faculty (90%) and student body (70%). Since the number of students of color in this school had risen in recent years, the faculty received one day of diversity training, which concluded with the faculty making a commitment to value

diversity. Let's peek in on the interview process.

SEARCH COMMITTEE DEBRIEFING

After weeks of screening applicants, the search committee narrowed the pool to two candidates. One applicant, Susan Walker, was originally from the Midwest and a recent graduate with a Ph.D. in instructional technology. The other, Miranda Garcia, was from a city along the Texas-Mexico border. She, too, had just graduated in the same field, but with a master's degree. Members of the search committee, when asked for feedback on the two applicants, said they wanted to hire Walker because "she's a better fit."

"What do you mean when you say she's a better fit?" asked the principal. After a long pause, one committee member said, "We're more comfortable with her because she's just like us." Others listening to the discussion nodded in agreement. This response was disconcerting. Immediately prior to the interviews, the search committee had made its hiring criteria clear. The committee was intent upon hiring a

K-12 educator with a graduate degree in instructional technology, strong instructional and interpersonal skills, and, most importantly, grant-writing experience. Garcia met all five criteria. She had been awarded several grants and came with references lauding her leadership, teaching, technology skills, and ability to effectively work with others. Walker had excellent references commending her extensive knowledge of technology, service as a university teacher assistant, strong communication, research, and writing skills, and a publication record. However, Walker had no public school experience, grant-writing skills, or record of winning grants.

Rather than determine the best-qualified individual for the position by evaluating each applicants' education, knowledge, and experiences against the job requisites, committee members seemed to be making this decision on an unstated, but commonly understood, principle of likeness, not diversity. In their eyes, Walker was right for the job because she thought, related, and communicated like most of the search committee members. Garcia did not relate to the committee in the same way. Despite their stated commitment to value diversity, these committee members viewed Garcia's interactions as deficits or obstacles to overcome, which in their eyes made her too different to be a member of their team. What transpired in the interviews for the committee to come to this conclusion?

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WALKER'S INTERVIEW

When Walker was introduced to the search committee by the principal, she looked each member in the eye, extended her hand, and, while calling each member by name, said, "Hello, I'm Susan. It's nice to meet you." As Walker took a seat, she made a humorous comment, which made everyone laugh and eased tension in the room. After engaging in a few minutes of small talk, the principal asked if Walker was ready to start. She said yes and turned her attention to the group. As members of the group posed questions, Walker answered each one directly and concisely while maintaining eye contact with the individual asking the question and glancing at other committee members from time to time. In requesting clarification on an interview question, Walker addressed the principal by her first name. When asked to name her strengths, Walker forthrightly discussed four or five strengths in detail. After the interview concluded, Walker thanked each committee member, shook each one's hand, and left.

GARCIA'S INTERVIEW

After being introduced to the committee by the principal, Garcia acknowledged the search committee by saying hello and quietly taking a seat. She then turned her attention to the principal, ready for the interview to start. When the principal asked if she had any trouble finding the school and if she would like a bottle of water, Garcia replied, "No, ma'am" to both questions. As members asked each interview question, Garcia made eye contact with the individual posing the question, but immediately turned her attention back to the principal while responding. Her responses were circuitous, often seemingly irrelevant, and lengthy except when asked to identify her strengths. When asked this question, Garcia paused for what seemed like a long time. She then

named one strength. When asked to elaborate, she appeared reluctant to do so. Although Garcia responded to each question in great detail, she did not seem to answer them. Like Walker, Garcia asked for clarification on a question, but she addressed the principal as "Dr. Stevens." At the conclusion of the interview, Garcia thanked the principal, smiled and nodded goodbye to the committee, then left the room.

CULTURE CLASH

After reading this case, some might conclude Garcia is timid, lacks self-confidence, rambles, is not very bright, or is rude. However, culturally proficient educators would recognize the cultural differences underlying Walker's and Garcia's interactions. To them, Garcia's interactions are a different style rather than a deficiency.

Simply put, culturally responsive educators understand Walker likely comes from a culture that highly values individual identity and achievement, equality, and explicit communication. Walker strives to stand out in the interview by articulating her extensive knowledge of technology and highlighting her many strengths. Since Walker believes each committee member will have input into the hiring decision, she connects personally with each one by using first names, shaking hands, maintaining direct eye contact, chatting, and making members laugh. More importantly, her explicit communication style matches that of the committee's. Each answer is precise, brief, and to the point. Since committee members have to infer little, they easily understand her communication. Culturally proficient educators understand that when a candidate and search committee members are from similar cultural backgrounds, they also share similar expectations for interviewing.

Culturally proficient educators also recognize Garcia may come from a

culture that highly values group identity and success, unequal distribution of power by status and privilege, and implicit communication. She strives to fit in rather than stand out. She is reluctant to discuss her strengths and accomplishments because she believes focusing on individual success divides rather than unites faculty. She focuses her attention on the principal when responding as a sign of respect for the principal's position of authority and because she assumes that, as the person in the position of authority, the principal will be making the hiring decision. Most importantly, culturally responsive educators understand that candidates like Garcia answer the questions using a different communication style. Garcia's responses were conveyed not only through the words she used to express herself, but also through context (i.e. shared experiences, nonverbal communication). With this communication style, committee members must infer meaning. Those who are unfamiliar with this communication style may struggle to follow its indirect and detailed nature and often end up confused. Culturally proficient educators realize that because Garcia and committee members come from different cultures, they also have different expectations for interviewing. Moreover, they know that unless search committees develop a cultural lens, Garcia and others like her are not likely to be hired. This makes their commitment to value diversity another well-intended but empty promise.

As this case illustrates, the ability to value diversity requires more than one day of training. It requires extensive, ongoing learning experiences that help educators develop a deep understanding of how culture influences people's thinking, communication, and actions and an understanding of the way culture underlies all systems, policies, procedures, and practices of the school. ■