Pushing Past Barriers: How Nonprofits Cross Cultures

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Research Question:

How do nonprofit organizations focused on social issues in the United States develop cultural competence?

Literature:

Cultural competence has been a growing issue with businesses and social organizations. In recent years, studies have been performed to show the effect diversity can have on nonprofit organizations. Studies also list effective ways how to effectively become culturally competent. We believe cultural diversity is often overlooked in the United States. How can nonprofits in the United States more effectively recognize cultural barriers in the United States and apply that knowledge to their missions?

Methods:

Peer reviewed articles and scholarly articles addressing cultural competency were reviewed and organized according to their relevance to the subject matter.

Local nonprofit organizations in Utah were asked a series of questions to gather information concerning their efforts on acquiring/maintaining cultural competency. How do you deal with differences in culture of the people that you serve? What cultural barriers have you run into? How have you overcome those? What plan, if any, is implemented to overcome these barriers?

Findings:

Classroom Reflective Development Model

It is not always possible to train staff on cultural competence through first-hand experiences. In light of this fact, this model creates an environment where individuals are able to be trained effectively in a classroom setting. This critical reflection challenges the assumptions, beliefs, and values of individuals so that they can apply their own experiences in order to bridge cultural differences.

Stage 1: Awareness

Conduct surveys that help individuals self-assess their own weaknesses and strengths in cultural competence and sensitivity.

Stage 2: Experience

Encourage individuals to interact with people of different cultures, backgrounds or even socio-economic status. This may include learning a foreign language or attending a cultural event.

Stage 3: Reflection

People tend to have pre-existing stereotypes, that once acknowledged and understood through reflection, can be addressed appropriately. This is the most important stage in developing cultural competence and includes four steps. First, is to describe the experience, thoughts, struggles or concerns. Next is to think and reflect on this topic, then to learn and lastly, to develop a plan of action (see Figure 1).

Stage 4: Assessment

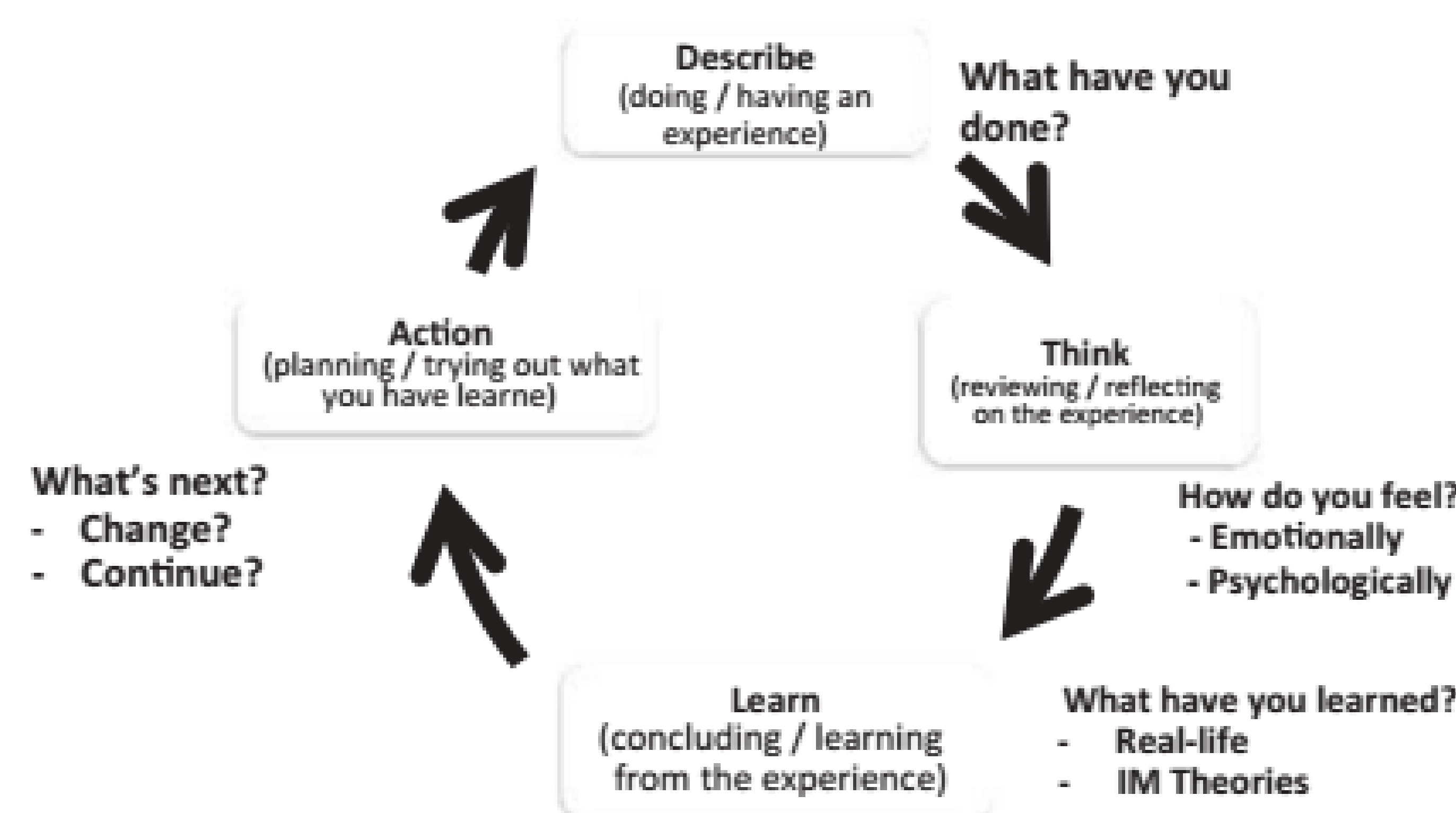Conduct surveys, such as the post-IES to assess progress.

Figure 1: Stage 3 of the Classroom Reflection Development Model

Findings Continued:

Common Practices Among Local Nonprofits

After interviewing a number of local nonprofits, we found that many of the organizations conduct required volunteer and staff training based on understanding and working with those in the culture being served by the organization. Another common practice involves hiring individuals who have successfully gone through the program being offered or experienced the culture themselves.

Research shows that it is effective for organizations to follow the 70-20-10 rule. This implies that 70% of learning comes from on the job experience and challenging assignments in cultural competence. 20% of learning comes from coaching, feedback, informal social learning and formal training seminars, while the other 10% of learning comes from traditional management development programs, training seminars, and so on.

When interviewing and observing local nonprofits, we found that many of them followed this rule by holding initial knowledge-based training sessions, which were then followed by more involved field experience opportunities.

Implications:

Globalization has become an important facet of life both in the private and nonprofit sectors. As a result, professionals must be able to cross cultural barriers to effectively work in their organizations. Our research into peer reviewed articles and discussion with local nonprofit organizations has uncovered key information that will prove useful to developing cultural competence. Applying these tools within the nonprofit sector will improve our ability to work across cultures and fulfill missions.

Improving cultural competency will not only help the work of international organizations, but will bridge gaps between cultures and subcultures within the US as well. It is important to recognize that many of the issues faced by people living within the United States can only be solved through the careful efforts of individuals willing to step outside of their cultural comfort zones. It is imperative that individuals on both sides of the aisle recognize, respect, and work with their differences.

Research shows that careful examination and participation in outside cultures is the best way to develop cultural competence. Whether through study abroad programs or in classroom activities, an experiential approach is the best for improving this skill. As organizations apply tools like the 70-10-20 rule or adopt programs like Dr. Feng's classroom model, they can implement program wide changes to improve cultural competence.

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