



Urban Alliance's 5-C Framework: Culture



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Culture Overview

In many cases, what makes an experience positive or negative is related to program culture, or the atmosphere in which the service is taking place.

Urban Alliance's 5-C Framework

Capacity is the degree to which programs have mechanisms in place to effectively operate.

Core services are the key offerings of a program.

Culture is comprised of program values, quality of relationships, service procedures, and characteristics of the program environment.

Connection occurs when a program links people to resources in the community.

Christian witness is reflecting the love and truth of God through words and actions.

Have you ever visited the doctor, gone shopping or received customer service support and thought to yourself, *“That was a wonderful experience”*? On the contrary, have you ever received a service and left feeling neutral, frustrated or even angry? Most people can relate to and easily come up with examples of both.

What made the experience positive or negative? Was it a person's tone of voice, lack of organization, sensitivity to your needs or caring disposition? Was it the pleasant physical environment or atmosphere? In many cases, what makes an experience positive or negative is related to program culture, or the atmosphere in which the service is taking place.

In general, culture can be defined as a group of people's way of life or way of doing things. The term culture is commonly used to describe the practices of groups of people from different ethnic backgrounds or geographic regions. However, this concept can also be applied to social service programs.

Urban Alliance uses a 5-C framework to describe areas of effective and sustainable programming. The concept of culture captures the more intangible aspects of programming, such as values, quality of relationships, service procedures and the characteristics of a program's environment. All of these elements collectively impact a person's experience as they receive services. Because many aspects of program culture are intangible, it is easy for it to be overlooked.

However, researchers and practitioners have come to view program culture as a key aspect of service delivery and recognize its ability to influence the degree to which a program achieves its desired outcomes. This means that healthy program culture can enhance a program's ability to have a positive impact on the people they serve, and that an unhealthy program culture can impede a program's ability to make a positive impact. For this reason, it is very important for program staff and volunteers to take time to assess the health of their program's culture and continually work to enhance it.

Characteristics of Healthy and Effective Program Culture

Safe: Measures are taken by volunteers and staff to ensure the program is physically and emotionally safe.

Relational: Staff and volunteers are consistently warm, welcoming and respectful. They believe that relationships matter and that enduring change takes place in relationship.

Organized: Services are delivered in a predictable and organized manner. Staff and volunteers clearly and respectfully communicate expectations and protocol.

Strength-based: Staff and volunteers hold a strength-based view of the people they serve, believing all are created in God's image and possess infinite worth.

Engaging: The physical environment is well maintained and engaging.

Culturally and contextually competent: Staff and volunteers are sensitive to unique beliefs, values and life situations, and offer services in ways that acknowledge and honor the cultural backgrounds of the people they serve.

Responsive: Staff and volunteers seek out feedback and use it to inform how services will be offered in the future. They are able to adjust their services in a healthy way to feedback and needs.

The following sections expand on each of these characteristics.

Safe: Measures are taken by volunteers and staff to ensure the program is physically and emotionally safe.

This aspect of program culture must be examined first. If a program is not experienced as physically or emotionally safe, people will not be able to fully engage in the services offered. Physical safety refers to a person's expectation that they will not be in a physically unsafe situation or harmed while receiving services. Emotional safety refers to a person's expectation that they will not be treated disrespectfully.



The Citadel of Love

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Characteristics of Healthy and Effective Program Culture

When programs are perceived as unsafe, a person's focus becomes self-protection and it is very hard for trust to be built. It is important to remember that negative interactions leave a stronger impression than positive ones. Often a person will not return to a program after a negative interaction. So, it is important to be very careful in each interaction and address situations quickly where staff or volunteers are behaving unprofessionally, speaking in a rude or irritated tone, or making a person feel unwelcome or devalued. While there is not an exact science to creating a safe environment, it is important to consider both the physical space and interactions between people.

Physical Safety Considerations:

- How often do physical altercations occur?
- Are staff and volunteers equipped to de-escalate threatening situations?
- Is there a process or procedure in place to keep the building secure? This can take a number of forms, including a security team, security system, locks on doors or a buzzer to get in.
- Is the inside and outside of the building adequately lit?
- Is the building accessible for people with hearing, visual and mobility impairments?
- Do people ever tell you that they don't feel safe during your program? Do people seem at ease?

Emotional Safety Considerations:

- How do staff and volunteers communicate? Do they consistently speak in a warm, caring and respectful tone? Or is their tone harsh or frustrated?
- How do staff and volunteers communicate with body language? Do they seem inviting and approachable? Or uninterested and irritated?
- Do people in the program speak to each other in an angry or irritated tone? Are their words kind and respectful?
- Do staff and volunteers follow through on what they say they will do?
- Does gossip occur?

- Are staff and volunteers able to respond to challenging situations with appropriate boundaries, kindness, respect and wisdom?

Relational: Staff and volunteers are consistently warm, welcoming and respectful. They believe that relationships matter and that enduring change takes place in relationship.

Humans are wired to be in relationships. Many consider isolation (the opposite of relationship) to be a public health epidemic, as it is linked to a number of negative physical and emotional outcomes. People are more likely to thrive when they have supportive and caring relationships present in their lives. Direct service staff and volunteers have a unique opportunity to build warm and caring relationships as they offer services.

It is important for program leaders to consider the degree to which relationship and connection are believed to be a valuable component of



Hartford City Mission

Characteristics of Healthy and Effective Program Culture

programming. When relationship is considered valuable among staff and volunteers, more time and energy are allotted to ensure strong relationships are built with each person served. Some programs, such as youth mentoring or care and counseling, are more naturally relational, as services are offered in the context of one-on-one relationships. Other programs, such as food pantries or clothing closets, need to be more intentional about creating opportunities to build relationship during programming.

There are a number of ways to make a program more relational. First, it is important to consider where there are opportunities for staff and volunteers to interact with the people they are serving. This may be while people are waiting to receive food at a pantry, during a support group meeting, while people are eating at a community meal, after the lesson at a youth group or while people are waiting to receive a health screening. The timing will be different depending on the program schedule.

When there is an opportunity for interaction, it is important for staff to do their best to greet each person when they arrive, learn the names of the people they are serving, take the time to get to know each person's story, and consistently speak and act in a caring and respectful manner. When these things happen consistently, relationships are built over time.

Relational Considerations:

- Do staff and volunteers feel it is important to build relationships with the people they serve? Do they believe that enduring change takes place in the context of relationships?
- Do staff and volunteers know the names of the people they serve? Are people greeted when they arrive?
- Does programming allow time for staff and volunteers to build relationship with the people they serve? Do staff and volunteers know the life situations of the people they serve?
- Do the people served feel a sense of belonging? Do

they feel welcomed? Do they feel that people are happy to see them and would miss them if they were not there?

Organized: Services are delivered in a predictable and organized manner. Staff and volunteers clearly and respectfully communicate expectations and protocol.

Service procedures refer to the way the program is offered and operates. Specifically, what happens and when? Two food pantries can have very different service procedures. One may place food on shelves and allow people to select their own food, while another prepacks food in boxes to be distributed. Both are distributing food, but have very different ways of doing so.

It is important for the services of any program to be offered in an organized way. When services are offered in a systematic, thoughtful and organized way, people feel more satisfied and at ease and, overall, the program operates more effectively.

When relationship is considered valuable among staff and volunteers, more time and energy are allotted to ensure strong relationships are built with each person served.

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In order for programming to be organized, it is important to consider what service procedures will best support program efficiency and plan ahead so staff and volunteers have what they need to operate in an organized way. This involves making a plan in advance, considering the resources (e.g. time, people, money, supplies) that are needed to carry out the plan, testing the plan, getting feedback from staff, volunteers and people served, and making adjustments when necessary.

Another important aspect of being organized is clearly communicating program procedures and expectations in advance. It is important for both staff and volunteers as well as people served to know their roles and responsibilities. For example, a support group leader's responsibility may be to set up the room in advance and greet people as they arrive. Participants may be responsible to arrive on time, bring snacks to share and participate in the group discussion. When everyone knows their roles and responsibilities, programming is likely to run in a smoother and more organized manner. Similarly, when programming is offered in a predictable way or the same way each time, trust is built and people feel safe. While change may be necessary to improve programming, it is important for changes to be implemented in a thoughtful way and clearly communicated to all involved.

Organizational Considerations:

- Have you considered different ways to offer programming? Are your current program procedures best suited for your program?
- Do staff and volunteers know their roles and responsibilities? Do people served know your expectations of them as they receive services?
- Do the people you serve perceive your program as organized?
- Is your program predictable? Is it offered in the same way(s) and at the same time(s)?

Strength-based: Staff and volunteers hold a strength-based view of the people they serve, believing all are created in God's image and possess infinite worth.

The term strength-based can be used to describe both a way of seeing others as well as a set of practices that guides how services are delivered. A strength-based view recognizes people as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity. It recognizes the capacity to learn, grow and change. In contrast, a deficit-based view of people focuses on their problems, needs or shortcomings. The way in which service providers think about the people they serve will influence how they interact with them and offer services. All people are created in God's image and possess infinite worth. This truth should influence the way people are viewed and treated. When a strength-based view of people being served is held by service providers, strength-based practices are a natural next step.

Strength-based practices are tangible ways a program incorporates a strength-based view into service delivery to help a person achieve lasting change. It is a collaborative process between a person receiving services and the service provider, where they work together to draw on the person's strengths and assets to achieve a goal or outcome.

Strength-based practices are marked by trusting



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working relationships between service providers and the people receiving services. They empower people to set their own goals, work collaboratively to achieve change, acknowledge and tap into people's personal assets, resources and motivation, and celebrate gains as each person grows and learns from the process of change. As strength-based practices are embraced, they become inherent in all parts of programming, including the language used by staff, volunteers and people served, policies and procedures, and service documentation.

Strength-based Considerations:

- How do staff and volunteers view the people they serve? What words do they use when talking about them?
- Are staff and volunteers eager to identify and celebrate the strengths and assets of each person served?
- How are goals set with people served? Is it through a collaborative process?
- Are strength-based language and practices integrated in the program's policies, procedures and documentation?

Engaging: The physical environment is well maintained and engaging to those being served.

All programming takes place in a physical environment. This may be a room in the basement of a church, space rented from a local Boys and Girls club or outside at a park. Programs should select or design spaces that are engaging to those they serve and meet the needs of the program. An engaging space is appealing and inviting and draws people towards programming. When a program's physical environment is not engaging, people may be more hesitant to participate or uninterested. In order for space to be engaging, at a very basic level, it needs to be clean and well maintained. This involves regularly emptying the trash, cleaning floors and surfaces, decluttering important spaces, repainting surfaces where paint is worn and fixing things when they are broken or need repair.



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A strength-based view recognizes people as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity.

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While this may seem obvious, capacity restraints may make basic repairs and maintenance difficult.

Different types of programs have unique physical space needs. In selecting and modifying physical space it is important to consider the flow of traffic, arrangement of furniture, types of activities that will occur, and décor and atmosphere that will be most engaging to those being served. For example, a program serving a community meal will likely need a large space where tables and chairs can be set up, with access to a kitchen, decorative place settings and floors that can be easily cleaned. A support group may need a smaller, more intimate setting with soft chairs and attractive wall art or decorations. A youth program may need space that reflects aspects of youth culture such as wall art, posters or music, engaging activities before or after programming, snacks and drinks, or comfortable chairs for youth to sit on while talking to friends. An early childhood program needs space that is safe for small children, toys and activities that are developmentally appropriate and decor that includes images and colors that appeal to young children. Each program needs to consider the people they serve and the needs of the program to determine how to create an engaging physical space.

Engaging Space Considerations:

- Who maintains the space where programming takes place? Do you ever notice that the trash is not taken out, that the space is not cleaned, or that it looks cluttered or rundown?
- Are there special physical space needs based on the type of programming you offer?
- Is the space where programming takes place conducive to the activities that take place during programming?
- Are the decorations, supplies and atmosphere a good fit for the population you serve?
- Is the space appealing and inviting to the people you serve?

Culturally competent: Staff and volunteers are sensitive to unique beliefs, values and

life situations, and offer services in ways that acknowledge and honor the cultural backgrounds of the people they serve.

Cultural sensitivity is an understanding and awareness of the influence of culture and context in people's lives. It involves being aware that cultural differences and similarities between people exist without assigning them a value. Cultural competency emphasizes the idea of effectively operating in different cultural contexts and altering practices to effectively serve different cultural groups. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures and involves being aware of one's own world view, developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences, and gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.

Awareness is an important first step in becoming more culturally competent. The American Psychological Association (APA) offers the following tips to improve cultural competency for individuals:

First, a person must learn about their own culture and any personal biases they may have. They might describe their ancestors and their experiences, think about how their family functions as a group, characterize their style of expressing emotions and relating to one another, and articulate their family's values. These exercises can increase their awareness of the way their own culture influences them. Second, it is important to learn about different cultures, their prevalence in different regions, their historical context, current events, laws or policies impacting them, and injustices or disparities experienced by them. Finally, building meaningful relationships with people of different cultures is key. Without interaction with people different from ourselves, it is impossible to develop cultural competencies. It is in the context of these relationships that people learn to understand, appreciate and navigate differences.

At a program level, cultural competence is a set

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of consistent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a program to allow for effective work in cross-cultural situations. Cultural competence requires that organizations 1) have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally; and 2) have the capacity to value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, acquire knowledge about different cultures, and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve. In order for a program to be considered culturally competent, these points must be incorporated into all aspects of programming, including policy making, administration, practice and service delivery, and must involve the people being served and key community stakeholders.

Culturally Competent Considerations:

- Do staff and volunteers have an awareness of their own culture and biases? Are staff and volunteers knowledgeable about the cultural values, practices and histories of the people being served?
- Are staff and volunteers able to effectively interact and build relationships with the various cultural groups served through your program?
- Are there staff or volunteers that speak the same language(s) or that are culturally similar to the people served?
- Does your program regularly assess its practices, procedures and policies to ensure they are sensitive and relevant to the cultures of the people served?
- Are important elements of cultural heritage (e.g. food, photos, music, history) incorporated into programming?
- Does your program communicate information in the language of those served?

Responsive: Staff and volunteers seek feedback and use it to inform how services will be offered in the future. They are able to adjust programming based on feedback and expressed needs.



North End Farmers Market

Cultural competency emphasizes the idea of effectively operating in different cultural contexts and altering practices to effectively serve different cultural groups.

A strong, continuous learning process can have a

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tremendous impact on a program's ability to improve programming and foster sustainable change in people's lives. Continuous learning involves 1) collecting feedback about programming from key stakeholders, such as people served, staff and volunteers; 2) interpreting the feedback; 3) using feedback to develop an action plan to improve programming; and 4) carrying out the action plan to offer stronger services.

There are a number of different ways to collect feedback. The primary way to learn more about people's experiences receiving services is to ask them. Surveys are a great way to capture data about a group of people. A short survey can be given to people who participate in your program to better understand their experiences receiving services, overall satisfaction and suggestions about how to improve programming. Group dialogues are another strategy that can be implemented to help people voice feedback and concerns. A group dialogue is a facilitated conversation where participants are asked a series of open-ended questions. One-on-one conversations are another way to collect feedback. These conversations can occur informally or through structured interviews.

There are strengths and weaknesses to each method of collecting feedback. Surveys are a good tool for capturing general feedback from a large group of people. However, they often do not provide descriptive information or examples. Dialogues and conversations offer more descriptive and detailed information about people's experiences. They also provide facilitators an opportunity to ask more questions to ensure they understand what a person is trying to communicate. However, they are usually limited to smaller groups and the experiences of the group may not represent those of all of the people served.

The final, and often neglected, steps in the continuous learning process are to interpret the feedback and use it to develop and carry out an action plan to improve programming. All too often information is collected but not used to make programmatic improvements. When information is used to strengthen programming, people are empowered because their voices are heard

and valued, and programs improve in ways that enhance their ability to have a positive impact on people's lives.

Responsive Considerations:

- Does your program collect feedback from people served? What strategies do you use? How often is feedback collected?
- Do you make specific plans to improve programming based on the feedback you received from people served, staff and volunteers?
- Do you let people know about the connection between their feedback and specific program improvements?



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A strong, continuous learning process can have a tremendous impact on a program's ability to improve programming and foster sustainable change in people's lives.
