

Building a Foundation for a Diverse Team

Introduction

When you look at a potato, what comes to mind? What information, thoughts or feelings arise? Any associations from your past? Write your thoughts down.

When you are done, make a title for your description. How would you quickly summarize what you wrote in a few words?

Take a minute to compare your description of the potato to some others:

Like my grandma

Rough dark brown skin. Makes me think of my grandma's arm. Mosquito bite scars. Splotches. Years of life. Remembering that she was young once. Fleshy and soft inside when cooked.

What a journey

The potato is native to the new world, but it has become a staple of the old. Growing up in a Polish family, I have a love/hate relationship with this vegetable. It's boring boiled! But every time I look at one, I think about my roots and how, like the potato, we've journeyed so far. Once we were an old world farming family, now we are new world urban dwellers.

Nutritious, delicious

The potato, despite its reputation for being a fattening food, is actually quite nutritious. When I look at this potato, I think of vitamin C. It also has a lot of potassium and vitamin B. It's actually better for you than an apple! And the skin, that is where all the good stuff is.

Comfort food

In my family we ate our potatoes mashed. Mashed with milk, butter, and a healthy dash of salt. This potato looks like a perfect mashing potato. Boil it for a while and soon you will have a cure to wash away all that ails you. The perfect comfort food.

Yuck!

I hate potatoes. They are so boring and tasteless. They don't even look good. All bumpy on the outside and if the skin turns green they make you sick. Carrots and lettuce, please!

How did your description compare to the others? Did any discuss the same dimensions as yours? In what way was your description similar or different than the others?

Expanding your lens

A potato can serve as an intriguing conversation starter. Pass raw potatoes to members of a group and you are sure to hear as many diverging observations and opinions as there are

people in the room. You can extend the metaphor to what group members see when they encounter others who are not just like them.

National service brings together teams of diverse people to serve together toward a common cause. The first challenge, however, is bringing a diverse team together in the first place.

Learning objectives

AmeriCorps and VISTA members, staff, and the communities they serve represent diverse cultures across the United States. National service provides an opportunity for members from diverse communities to come together and work for change. Despite the increasing diversity of this country, building a diverse team is not always easy. In this tutorial you will:

- Reflect on the dimensions of diversity
- Identify who is serving on your team
- Gain knowledge for building a diverse team
- Define your next steps

Dimensions of Diversity

A reflection activity

Diversity can be defined as what makes one person different from another. The dimensions of diversity include the many ways people are defined or define themselves.

How many are there?

Before looking at the dimensions of diversity model, take a minute to think about the topic. What are some of the dimensions of diversity that have impacted you personally, professionally, or both?

Brainstorm as many dimensions of diversity as you can. Some examples are: race, age, education, thinking styles...

This tutorial identifies 20 dimensions of diversity. How many dimensions did you list?

What are they?

The dimensions of diversity include the many ways that groups of people are defined or define themselves. Some are characteristics that people are born with and cannot change, while others evolve over time.

This model of diversity includes three concentric circles each representing a group of dimensions.

Outer Circle

The dimensions are a combination of things that we are born with and those that we have control over. They are also likely to change over time and are often not visible until we begin to get to know someone.

- Thinking Styles
- Perceptions of Self, Others, and Work
- Leader Styles
- Communication Styles
- Problem-Solving Approaches
- Work Habit Styles

Middle Circle

The dimensions in this area are more fluid and may change over time. Some are also less visible than the dimensions in the inner circle.

- Language
- Income
- Marital Status
- Education
- Geographic Location
- Type of Family
- Work Experience
- Spiritual Beliefs

Inner Circle

The dimensions in this area represent parts of ourselves that we are born with and cannot change. These dimensions are often the ones that people see first and use to define others.

- Age
- Ethnicity
- Race
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender
- Physical Qualities

View the [Dimensions of Diversity diagram](#).

Model of diversity

Having a diverse corps, that includes a variety of people from each dimension, expands the perspectives of your team and provides a model of diversity to the communities in which you work.

Who Is on Your Team?

Who is on your staff?

Acknowledging the value of a diverse staff is one approach to recruiting diverse members. Benefits include having staff members who might understand the cultural barriers that could prevent diverse recruits from joining your team, as well as staff who can serve as role models and mentors to members once they join.

Khouan Rodriguez, the project director of the AmeriCorps ACCESS Project (Greensboro, NC) that seeks to help immigrants and refugees gain better access to human services, build bridges with mainstream society, and become economically self-sufficient, talks about the importance of having a diverse staff:

It would be a great idea to have someone in your staff from a different culture. If you're trying to do more outreach to a Latino community, and you don't have someone who speaks the language to go out there and make a connection, it will be somewhat more of a challenge. The other thing is to contact your local churches or mosques, talk to the imam or the padre of the church and ask him if I can come in and talk about AmeriCorps and see what we can do to help as far as, you know, doing service for the community, get them involved.

Recognizing diversity

A diverse team is created when multiple dimensions are represented within the group. Take some time to think about the members who serve in your program.

Select the dimensions in which there is diversity in each population:

- Age
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Race
- Language
- Education
- Spiritual beliefs
- Leadership styles
- Communication styles
- Problem-solving approaches
- Work habits & styles

Choose one of the dimensions not well represented. What are the factors that cause you to have less diversity?

What are steps you can take to encourage diversity in your program? Is there one dimension on which you'd like to focus to benefit your team, and what can you do to support your efforts?

What's Needed to Build a Diverse Team?

Resources from the field

Diversifying a team may mean going outside one's comfort zone to build new networks and relationships, as well as require partnership building and learning about new cultures.

Here's what Khouan Rodriguez says about the importance of seeking out diverse volunteers, and not waiting for them to come to you:

With AmeriCorps members, our program pretty much served immigrant refugee communities. What we learned is that they're not gonna come to you, you have to go to them and then build that relationship back to what Adele was saying, you gotta build that relationship, it's not one of those things where if you build it, they will come, you gotta take it to them and then try to get them to have the buy in-that actually this is for your benefit as well as for the entire community.

"Everyday Heroes"

We've got a lot of different people (in our corps). People born everywhere, coming from everywhere. From all parts of the city, we come from the ghetto and from the middle class...The kids (we serve) are going to get taught by us from a lot of different angles. I might be working with someone who is white, so they are going to get my experience and they are going to get the experience of another (member). (A former corps member talking about his team in "Everyday Heroes.")

This video contains personal stories and interviews with a diverse AmeriCorps team as they make their way through a year of service.

Visit the [Resource Center](#) to learn more about the "Everyday Heroes" video.

Your Next Steps

Reflection

Now that you have had time to reflect on your situation, and read through resources on recruiting a diverse team, what would you like to do next to diversify your team?

Write about your next steps:

- In the next six months I hope to ...
- I will know that I have added to the diversity of my team when.....

Conclusion

By engaging diversity at the team level, you are setting an example for diversity at the community level.

This quote from Bill Clinton's State of the Union Address (January 27, 1998) illustrates the power and potential of a diverse population helping each other toward common virtue.

We must work together, learn together, live together, serve together. On the forge of common enterprise, Americans of all backgrounds can hammer out a common identity. We see it today in the United States military, in the Peace Corps, in AmeriCorps. Wherever people of all races and backgrounds come together in a shared endeavor and get a fair chance, we do just fine. With shared values and meaningful opportunities and honest communications and citizen service, we can unite a diverse people in freedom and mutual respect. (Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, Jan 27, 1998)

Resources

Explore the following resources, depending on the dimensions you want to diversify in your team.

- [Recruiting Bilingual and Ethnically Diverse Members](#)—the top five things to think about when seeking out members of different cultures.
- [Members with Disabilities](#)—tips for identifying, placing, and supporting people with disabilities.
- [Considerations for Rural/Village Local VISTA Recruitment](#)—how one program recruits in remote sites.
- Male Mentors and Hispanic Communities—a presentation on this topic.
 - [audio presentation](#)
 - [transcript, handouts and supplemental materials](#)
- [Male Volunteers](#)—research into what makes men volunteer.
- [How People 50+ Can Help Your Organization](#)—a tutorial on recruiting boomers.