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The Challenges Of Working In A Multicultural Society (And How To Overcome Them)



Asher Ben Arie **Former Forbes Councils Member**
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POST WRITTEN BY

Asher Ben Arie

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Culture is **defined** as “the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group; the

characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.”

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is **defined** as “the presence of, or support for the presence of, several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society.”

All around the world, countries and societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, composed of various social groups characterized by different values, beliefs and ways of life. As a social entrepreneur working with and providing services to a wide range of groups and cultures, you must deal with many challenges along the way, especially when it comes to dealing with sensitive social issues that challenge social values and behaviors.

Some major questions I’ve debated on while working in the field of child abuse and neglect in Israel, a multicultural state, include:

- Can we assume universal values of children’s rights for body integrity, safeguarding and well-being when meeting different cultural and social groups in our society?
- Do we have the mandate, as an institute dealing with child abuse and neglect, to interfere and risk bypassing communal or religious leaders by sharing our knowledge and tools with their communities?
- Is our knowledge based on multicultural research? Can it truly represent and be relevant to diverse cultural beliefs and ways of life?
- How can we overcome the differences between our own values and beliefs and those of the various cultural and ethnic groups we interact with?

Although these questions were recoiling at first, my staff and I decided to dig deeper and try to develop better ways of becoming a cultural-competent organization. We understood that in order to spread our knowledge and place ourselves as a leading institute in the world of child abuse and neglect, we needed to reach out to potential cultural and ethnic groups and make ourselves relevant to them.

Here are some of our tips for working with and becoming relevant to a variety of social groups, no matter the topic or goal of your nonprofit organization:

1. Learn about your audience's culture, values and beliefs.

Before jumping into writing a work offer or creating a program for a cultural or ethnic group you want to start working with, do your homework. Read about the group's unique characteristics, values and beliefs.

Understand the community's political structure, and determine who your main contacts are. Start meeting with people from within the group, and understand the sensitive issues that might come up during your collaboration. Without the right knowledge, you won't become culturally sensitive, and you may even lose your relevance to that group.

2. Acknowledge the gaps.

Not only do you have to thoroughly research the cultural or ethnic group you are about to work with, but also you have to acknowledge and take into consideration the possible gaps between your culture and theirs.

Raising awareness of these gaps will help you become more culturally competent and be mindful and sensitive at every stage of your journey together. By acknowledging that both groups

might see things differently, you can prepare yourself in advance for potential disagreements and bumps along the way.

3. Be creative and outgoing.

Working with audiences that are different from your usual crowd requires thinking outside of the box. At the Haruv Institute, for example, every time we plan a program for a specific ethnic or cultural group, whether it is the ultra-Orthodox, Arab or asylum-seekers' community, we hand-tailor our teaching methods, lectures and program settings in order to meet the community's unique needs and provide them with relevant information.

But creativity is not enough -- you also must be outgoing. Reaching out, putting yourself in a new crowd and marking the possible contribution you'll have are inevitable parts of expanding your target audience.

4. Check yourself.

Throughout your work process, you have to continuously check yourself and make sure you are being competent and sensitive to different cultures, but also remaining true to your own goals and values.

Ask yourself, "Am I touching on the issues/interests that are relevant to the community I'm working with? Am I being judgmental? Am I still true to my agenda, but in cases of conflict able to touch on the differences and disagreements between the societies?"

5. Respect and empower.

We want to and must respect the culture, uniqueness and communal structures of the cultural or ethnic group we're working with. Be humble and understanding while aiming to spread your knowledge and provide tools to help the community

deal with different issues. They will implement them under their own values and traditions.

In conclusion, whether you're working in an economic, social or legal NGO, when it comes to working with different cultures, you must aim to be as culturally competent as you can. Not only will you be respecting the values and beliefs of others, but also you will be able to work with new crowds, become more relevant and gain a deeper understanding of the field you're working in.

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Asher Ben Arieh

Prof. Asher Ben-Arieh, PhD, is the Director of the [Haruv Institute](#) in Jerusalem, Israel.

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