
BEYOND AWARENESS: ENGAGING ETHNOCULTURAL/RACIAL COMMUNITIES: THE CHINESE-CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

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THE OTHER DAY, AFTER I PAID FOR MY PURCHASE AT A BOOKSTORE IN Vancouver, BC, the young Anglo-Canadian sales clerk wished me a “Happy Chinese New Year” and commented on how we were ending the Year of the Tiger and entering the Year of the Rabbit (as of February 3, 2011). I was momentarily caught off guard by her casual reference to Chinese New Year and her obvious familiarity with this occasion and its associated zodiac symbolism. Upon reflection, I was also struck by the naturalness of our exchange – her well wishes and my response that the date would be early this year – as if we were talking about other commonly celebrated holidays, such as Christmas or Halloween.

Forty years ago, this casual conversation about a specific ethnocultural event would never have taken place between a Chinese person and non-Chinese person in public in Vancouver. A non-Chinese person might have ventured to casually talk to me about “chicken chow mein” and other Chinese dishes, but Chinese New Year would not have been a familiar event for everyone who lived in Vancouver four decades ago. This recent conversation with a stranger, referencing a celebration that in the past would have been considered “ethnic” and observed by a minority of people in the community, made me think how “mainstream” some aspects of Chinese culture, especially celebratory events, have become in Canada, particularly in Metro Vancouver.

Today, financial institutions staffed by a mix of Asian¹ and non-Asian individuals in Metro Vancouver give out complimentary Chinese/English calendars and red packets (albeit with their company logo printed on the front of the packet) at Chinese New Year. They also have on hand new crisp five-, ten-, twenty-, fifty-, and hundred-dollar bills for their customers to withdraw during the Chinese New Year period. In recent years I have been receiving Chinese New Year cards from institutions or individuals wishing to cultivate their donor relationship with me. Around this time of year, I find the flyers of our supermarket chains advertising food items on sale for Chinese New Year or specialty stores such as a well-known Vancouver chocolate business creating special chocolate boxes as part of their product offering. Increasingly, it is not uncommon to find non-Chinese staff in workplaces celebrating this occasion by going out for a Chinese meal, organized by either their Chinese or non-Chinese co-workers.

One might say that Chinese New Year has become as commercial as Christmas because companies foresee profitable opportunities. Yet it can also be said that this particular Chinese festival now belongs to everyone in Metro Vancouver who wishes to participate.

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At public events, whether community fundraisers, sports events, music events, or public gatherings, the audience always has a healthy proportion of “Asians.” Indeed, society columns in the Vancouver news media feature well-known Asian community members as well as prominent individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. It is not uncommon to find community organizations in Metro Vancouver recruiting individuals from various multicultural communities, in particular from the Chinese and South Asian communities. Immigrant issues are commonly reported in the mainstream news media, not as something special but as an issue that is an integral part of the social fabric of Metro Vancouver.

I never thought forty years ago that what one would consider “Asian” or “Chinese” would be seen as normal and everyday around Metro Vancouver. Today I am reminded how far the west coast of Canada has come in having our multicultural diversity reflected in our daily lives, through the Asian experience. Indeed, to some Chinese Canadians, the “mainstream” is considered to be Chinese Canadians. To some degree this thought is reflected in Census 2006 and the top 10 immigrant source countries to British Columbia.

Census 2006 confirms that the top five largest visible minority groups in British Columbia are Chinese (407,225; 10% of the total population), South Asian (262,290; 6.4% of the total population), Filipino (68,075; 2.2% of the total population), Korean (50,490; 1.2% of the total population), and South East Asian (40,685; 1% of the total population). And 86.6% of BC’s visible minority population resides in Metro Vancouver.²

The top five immigration source countries in 2009 were the People’s Republic of China, India, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and Korea.³

Yet there are signs that segments of our community have not yet fully embraced the ethnocultural/racial diversity that exists, in that this diversity is not reflected throughout their organizations’ structure and programs. Or when attempts are made to make their organizations reflective of Vancouver’s ethnocultural/racial diversity, there have been mixed results. During the recent opening ceremonies for the 2010 Winter Olympics, concerns were raised about the lack of multicultural diversity being reflected at this international event.

Local community organizations are still working to make their boards, staff, services, and programs not only reflective of but also responsive to the multicultural diversity of Metro Vancouver. This article explores some of their challenges.

TWO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

I have been asked many times in my professional and community work to suggest people from the Chinese-Canadian community who could be approached to sit on boards, to work as volunteers, or to provide strategic advice on how an organization could be responsive to multicultural diversity, in particular responsive to the Chinese-Canadian community. Interestingly, I cannot recall ever being asked to refer names of Chinese Canadians or any other ethnocultural/racial individuals who could work as a staff person in a position that was not targeted to a specific ethnocultural/racial group. Let us examine two frequently asked questions.

Question 1: We have a board position becoming vacant. Do you know someone from the Chinese community who would be interested in becoming a board member?

In the past I would very likely have offered a number of possible names of individuals who I thought would be interested in being part of the organization. Today, before responding, I would be asking about the kind of background they are looking for. Are they seeking someone originally from China or Taiwan or Hong Kong or someone who was born in Canada or someone who came to Canada when they were young? Language ability would be another consideration: How fluent do they have to be in English? What expertise is expected? Why would they want to recruit a person from this background? How many other persons with multicultural background sit on the board?

The answer to why an organization is looking for a Chinese-Canadian board member is crucial, especially to younger professional Chinese Canadians. Individuals being recruited or sought are today wiser and more experienced than ever about the issue of diversity and inclusiveness. They are conscious of and familiar with this kind of search. Many individuals, in particular young, bilingual, educated Chinese Canadians, do not wish to be considered as “filling the multicultural quota.” They want to be considered for their professional and personal merits. They do not want to be “locked” into the “multicultural ghetto” and/or considered as a source for financial contributions from their ethnocultural/racial community.

In terms of creating substantive change or making diversity part of one’s organization, I share a similar view with the advocates of gender equality. In the case of ethnocultural/racial participation at the governance level, I think having at least two to three people from the same or different ethnocultural/racial background creates a real opportunity to make cultural and racial diversity a reality in the organization. To do this will require that nominating committees think resourcefully. For example, if an accountant is needed, why could this not be a person from a specific ethnocultural/racial background—bringing to the organization their accounting expertise first, as well as familiarity with their ethnocultural/racial community?

Nominating committees need to also be wary of unintentionally stereotyping ethnocultural/racial communities according to certain professions or occupations, e.g., focusing on Chinese-Canadian business persons or entrepreneurs when seeking a person who could assist in fundraising, versus casting the net wider by focusing on community activists who might be physicians or dentists or social workers.

Question 2: How do we go about making our organization or programs or services responsive to the ethnocultural/racial diversity of our community?

My initial response today is a question related to motivation: Why do you want to embark on this journey? Then the next set of questions becomes: Who is behind this push? What kind of responsiveness do you believe is desirable? Which ethnocultural/racial communities do you want to target? And why? What relationships do you already have with the communities you want to target?

Wishing to be responsive to or more reflective of the ethnocultural/racial diversity of one's community is easier said than done. It is easy to develop mission and value statements reflecting this objective. It is relatively easy to develop strategic plans, policies, and guidelines to reflect one's mission and value statements that include the desire to be more reflective and inclusive of the community's ethnocultural/racial diversity. The greater challenge is making the mission and value statements a reality, to follow through with the strategic plans and to get the desired results.

EIGHT LESSONS IN CULTIVATING ETHNOCULTURAL/RACIAL DIVERSITY

Over the past 20 years I have learned a number of lessons about making ethnocultural/racial diversity a reality in organizations.

CEO/Executive Director commitment is key but not enough

Change agents working to make ethnocultural/racial diversity a reality in organizations have consistently stated that a key success factor is to have the commitment and buy-in from the CEO or executive director. I would add that it is not only important that the CEO is on board; commitment is also needed from the chair of the organization and majority of board members, or at least from influential board members. Finally, buy-in is also required from senior or middle management – the “gatekeepers” to the organization's delivery system.

Prepare to adopt new ideas and approaches

When one embarks on the journey of ethnocultural/racial diversity, one must be open to ideas or approaches that are different (and sometimes significantly different) from the organization's customary or established practices. For example, if an organization chooses to establish an Advisory Committee or task group such as a Chinese-Canadian Advisory Committee or a South Asian Task Group to deal with a particular subject, as a key strategic approach for making ethnocultural/racial diversity a reality, staff within the organization need to be willing to adopt the advice and suggestions offered, even if what is suggested may appear to stretch the organization's resources or challenge an organization's customary way of thinking.

Not to adopt the group's recommendations will throw into question whether the organization sincerely wishes to engage with the targeted ethnocultural/racial community. There is also a risk to the organization's reputation within the ethnocultural community, given that the individuals recruited to the Advisory Committee will very likely be influential or well-known individuals from the said community.

These types of issues can be overcome as they arise when the person responsible for managing the program and/or change is intellectually and personally committed to making ethnocultural/racial diversity a reality because it is the “right thing to do.” In fact, such changes may be an absolute necessity for the future of the organization if it wants to continue to be relevant in serving its community.

Managers or directors with a personal and professional commitment that is equal to or greater than their CEO or executive director will be willing to find and try adopting creative solutions within their program areas to enable the organization to improve pro-

gramming or services for the non-ethnocultural/racial communities. These individuals will see very quickly that ideas to accommodate language and cultural needs of a specific ethnocultural community may also bring benefits to their “mainstream” clients.

Volunteers from ethnocultural/racial communities – a challenge or valuable asset?

Recruiting volunteers from ethnocultural/racial communities may be another strategic approach adopted by an organization. However, an organization will need to deal with minor challenges that can be overcome with creative solutions: Can volunteers whose first language is not English or French be accommodated and included in an organization's services and programs? Are individuals who are newcomers to Canada, or immigrants not trained or educated in Canada, perceived as a “problem” or as a valuable asset who are able to provide new ideas or new approaches for the organization to consider?

Targeting an ethnocultural/racial community and building relationships

Knowing which communities to target helps to ensure success, because it gives the organization a better chance to develop the necessary relationships within the specific community. Today, if a person asks me how can they make their services more responsive to the Chinese-Canadian community, my initial response will be to ask which segment they are referring to: people from the People's Republic of China (the country of origin of the majority of Chinese immigrants to Canada in the past five years), or people from Taiwan, or Chinese people from Hong Kong, or Chinese people from other parts of the world (considered Overseas Chinese), or local-born Chinese Canadians? Chances are, the answer will be “All of the above.”

My response in turn would be, are they aware that although these people are all Chinese, there are differences between and among these groups in terms of social and professional networks, language spoken and written, interests, and relationship with Canada?

For example, Chinese from the People's Republic of China (PRC) are the most recent arrivals to Canada. They speak Mandarin, the official language of China, and they read and write what is termed “simplified Chinese,” i.e., there are fewer strokes in a Chinese character (word). Their orientation is different from Chinese from Taiwan or Hong Kong. Philanthropy and volunteering will likely not be familiar practices to the newer arrivals from China, because China is still in the process of building these concepts as customary practices in their society.

In contrast, Chinese people from Taiwan speak Mandarin, but they read and write “traditional Chinese” (Chinese characters with more strokes). They are accustomed to the practices of philanthropy and volunteering.

Prior to 1997, Chinese from Hong Kong spoke Cantonese; however, when Hong Kong reverted back to China, people from Hong Kong will now likely be able to speak Mandarin as well. This group will also likely be English speakers. They are able to read and write both simplified and traditional Chinese; but increasingly, because of their political relationship to China, they will adopt communication patterns similar to those of China. Philanthropy and volunteering are very familiar concepts for people from Hong Kong. Indeed, they may also be very aware of Canadian organizations that are part of an international movement, such as the YMCA, YWCA, Red Cross, and United Way.

Local-born Chinese and Overseas Chinese share a common heritage with Chinese from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong but may not necessarily be fluent in the spoken and/or written language. Familiarity with Chinese cultural practices will vary in this group, depending on how much the individual's family observed Chinese cultural practices. If they grew up in the Western hemisphere, philanthropy and volunteerism will be familiar concepts and practices.

“Who do you know already?” Opening windows of opportunity

It may sound overly simple, but I always ask the question “Who do you know already?” Building on known relationships or seeking out individuals who are familiar with the organization and its work from their country of origin facilitates access into the ethnocultural/racial community in question. Seeking out these types of connections means asking all people associated with one's organization – board members, paid staff (professional and non-professional), and volunteers – who they know. Such an initiative may lead to “windows of opportunity.”

Recruiting ethnocultural/racial staff

Another approach is to recruit staff from the ethnocultural/racial community that one wishes to engage with. This strategy has been successfully used in the fundraising area, particularly in the health care sector. It has also been used with success within services and programs where overcoming language and cultural barriers is essential to serving an organization's ethnocultural/racial clients.

Yet finding ethnocultural/racial diversity reflected in senior management positions of not-for-profit organizations does not appear to be as common as finding it in front-line staff. This begs the question: Have we unconsciously created “cultural/racial ghetto” positions in our organizations, similar to the “pink ghetto” positions that have been associated with women in the private sector? Or is it the case that individuals from ethnocultural/racial communities prefer, or have been encouraged by their parents to pursue, professional careers in medicine, law, dentistry, or business, therefore limiting the pool of qualified available individuals, as has been suggested to me recently? Or have individuals from ethnocultural/racial communities inadvertently backed themselves into these “cultural/racial ghetto” positions through highlighting their bilingual and bi-cultural assets as a means of obtaining work?

At another level we hear about newcomers to Canada with professional backgrounds who are unable to find work because of a lack of Canadian experience. This group includes individuals with expertise in the not-for-profit sector or public sector from their countries of origin. Have we in the NGO sector fallen into the same trap of requiring “Canadian experience” as an important success factor for the position?

The answer can likely be found in how we view these senior management positions in organizations. Do selection committees – whether at the board level when seeking their next executive director or hiring committees recruiting senior managers – consider the issue of ethnocultural/racial diversity as a key or desirable experience or knowledge factor to be included in the position's job description? As I view the landscape of not-for-profit organizations in British Columbia, I find that the largest population of ethnocultural/racial professional staff work in immigrant settlement agencies.

The challenge for all of us is to find ways to open the door for individuals from ethnocultural/racial communities to be able to compete with others. It is not a question of preferential treatment of this group of individuals at the expense of local born; it is about orienting our minds to see what value the organization can gain from having diverse ideas and experiences brought to the table.

Be willing to adapt or alter program or service delivery

Once individuals are brought into an organization, people in management, in particular senior management, need to be receptive to ideas and suggestions that may require altering or adapting how one delivers a service or program. The first step is to truly understand and appreciate the community one is seeking to engage.

For example, a well-recognized form of fundraising is seeking donations and support through the mail. This form of solicitation does not work with Chinese-Canadian donors. A higher response and participation rate from this community can be successfully obtained through special events or special campaign drives.

A key success factor for engaging Chinese Canadians is relationship building. Special events or campaigns with an educational awareness component, which require some form of direct contact and/or invitation, are far more effective than a mail campaign. Interestingly, seeking donations via the Internet, when combined with a special event, seems to have special attraction for Chinese Canadians. Being personally invited to contribute and participate by an individual that someone knows is a major factor. Another attractive factor, I suspect, is the immediacy of the act – donating online and receiving a tax receipt a few minutes later.

Reaching out to build relationships

A final key component for an organization to consider in responding to a particular ethnocultural/racial community is reaching out to build a mutually beneficial relationship. The relationship should be a two-way street: for example, not only making your organization known to Chinese-Canadian organizations or services, but also becoming familiar with these organizations.

Ethnocultural/racial communities are just as diverse as the “mainstream” community. How best then to reach these communities, such as the Chinese-Canadian community, in order to inform and build recognition of one’s organization? The answer is through the “ethnic or multicultural” media. It is a fairly well known fact in Metro Vancouver, particularly by governments and consumer-oriented companies, that the Chinese media play a key role in connecting with the wide spectrum of the Chinese-Canadian community. Organizations need to cultivate a relationship with the journalists and their media outlets. In Vancouver these include two television stations: Fairchild TV and Omni TV; three radio stations: FM 96.1, AM 1320, and AM 1470; three daily newspapers: World Journal (primary target audience are people from Taiwan), Ming Pao, and Sing Tao (both with origins in Hong Kong); and one weekly newspaper, Global News (read primarily by new immigrants from the People’s Republic of China).

Today there are mainstream organizations in Metro Vancouver – such as BC Children’s Hospital Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society, Collingwood Neighbourhood

House, Options Community Services Society, and the Vancouver Foundation – which have successfully found ways of engaging specific ethnocultural/racial communities, such as Chinese Canadians and South Asians, in meeting their organization’s mandate. However, the challenge still exists when one considers that according to Census 2006, the Filipino, Korean, and South East Asian populations are among the top five of BC’s largest visible minority groups.

Plus there are other groups in Metro Vancouver, such as people from Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan, who may not come readily to mind. By building on the experience of the early pioneers in this area, by increasing the dialogue with ethnocultural/racial communities, and by being committed to make the necessary changes or adjustments, mainstream organizations will be able to move beyond simply being aware of Canada’s ethnocultural/racial diversity. Given how far we have travelled to date, I am optimistic that organizations will meet the challenge of engaging with these communities as we move forward.

NOTES

1. The term “Asian” is commonly used to refer to “Chinese Canadians” in Vancouver, as opposed to “South Asians,” who are of Indian descent. In another article in this edition South Asian refers to people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.
2. “The Diversity of Visible Minorities and Ethnic Origins in BC” (2008, June). Welcome BC [Census fact sheet]. Multiculturalism and Immigration Branch, Ministry of Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism. URL: http://www.welcomebc.ca/local/wbc/docs/communities/visible_minorities_ethnic_origins.pdf.
3. Ibid.