

BEGIN WITH LEADERSHIP AND VISION



The commitment to work with immigrant youth needs to start from the top! Lots of staff don't have a clear understanding of where the organization is going on all this stuff; so even if there's training, people say 'Why do I have to take this if I'm not sure of the bigger direction? What do you want us to do?' –Local Outreach Coordinator

Much has been described here about hiring, preparing, and retaining youth workers who will work directly with immigrant youth. Yet this work is next to impossible unless there is strong leadership and vision to determine the direction of an organization and prioritize necessary resources. The leader sets the tone by creating an organizational climate that supports and honors this work. When the right internal environment gets established, the organization's image shifts accordingly and it becomes easier to attract and retain qualified staff. The next few pages outline ways in which an organization can think through what changes it might need to make to work successfully with immigrant children and youth.

Be Proactive

Leaders must create an expectation that immigrant children and youth are an integral part of the organization. They can:

- **Communicate expectations clearly and affirmatively within the organization.** When leaders consistently share their beliefs and expectations at orientations, staff meetings and trainings, they impress upon staff the importance of understanding and learning to work with newcomers. In contrast, some leaders send double messages:
 - "Everyone is welcome here, but it's not a priority to reach out to immigrants."
 - "I'd love to see us do this work, but it's just too hard to find bilingual staff."
 - "We want to include these kids, but it's not our job to help them hold on to their language or customs."

These kinds of comments signal ambivalence and don't provide a clear direction for staff who are working with immigrant youth.

- **Be a spokesperson in the community.**

Communicate organizational goals, philosophy, services, staffing needs, and opportunities to important stakeholders outside the organization. Speak at community events, join local coalitions, dialogue and strategize with other organizations.

Tap into Leaders' Strengths

I grew up in the Chinatown community where the organization is located. Being Chinese and from the community has helped me establish neighborhood trust and credibility. It's provided me with an irreplaceable "second nature" about the culture and traditions of many of the youth and staff with whom I work. It has also served to keep me emotionally grounded and committed to the mission of serving Asian immigrant populations. –Local Agency Director



Maximize your strengths. Leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds bring specific strengths to this endeavor. Those who come from the same immigrant communities they are serving bring assets such as increased awareness, empathy, language expertise, and a head start at being able to build trusting relationships with families. Those leaders who are not immigrants might be able to intentionally reach out to immigrant children and youth, especially in communities where there is social, economic, or political resistance. The non-immigrant voice can bring important credibility to the issue. These leaders can open the dialogue about community views of immigrants or anti-immigrant prejudice, in ways that might not be available to immigrant leaders.

Represent the broad diversity. Immigrants come from all countries and speak hundreds of different languages. Given the changing demographics across the United States, organizational leaders, including boards of directors, need to represent the different races, cultures, and languages of both immigrant and non-immigrant populations.

Be Explicit

I hired the Latina Project Manager and we sat down to map out everything. The visioning is really critical, so it's important to identify your outcomes and put together a strategic plan for reaching them.

–Local Agency Director

Convey intent. Something as simple as using the word “immigrant” in the title of a new initiative conveys an organization’s explicit intent to reach out to immigrant youth and provide key services. Several large national organizations have implemented comprehensive outreach initiatives designed to promote inclusion and build effective services for underserved cultural and immigrant groups. Such initiatives:

- Bring an explicit focus and intentionality to immigrant-related staffing efforts and connect them with outreach to immigrant youth and families.
- Establish the organization’s credibility with immigrant communities.
- Provide an anchor for building partnerships with ethnic groups and other immigrant-serving organizations.
- Attract funding, including pass-through funding from national organizations to support local outreach staff.
- Attract strong immigrant workers and staff who are passionate about working with immigrants.
- Provide a roadmap for the development of staff tools and resources related to serving immigrants.
- Guide the expansion of staff development and training agendas.

Using Language Acquisition to Promote Inclusivity

A key part of creating an inclusive organizational culture is the use of participants’ home languages. At the Boys and Girls Club of West Georgia, Director Wally West has seen a 30% increase among Latino participants in just three years. Wally’s vision for serving this new population is to “make sure the entire organization changes with the times.” He has instituted free weekly Spanish classes for his staff and the community, an effort that he knows won’t make his staff fluent in Spanish, but that nevertheless sends send message to immigrant participants and families that the agency and staff are committed to communicating more effectively with them. Since the classes began, immigrants at the Club recognize that staff is trying to reach out to them and want to meet them half way. This effort has proven extremely encouraging to families who often feel like they are out there treading water alone. The program, which has been in place for three years now, also publicize a “Spanish phrase of the week,” which all staff and participants are encouraged to learn and use. All of this is adding up to a warmer and more welcoming environment for an increasingly diverse community.

Create an Inclusive Organizational Culture

We have 20 staff members, and of those, about 65 percent have been here five or more years. I think that has something to do with the fact that I'm Latina. A lot of our staff has faced many of the same challenges and struggles as the kids that we serve. I'm first-generation, so I grew up with Spanish as my first language. And I struggled to attain education and move up the ladder. It has been motivating for staff to learn about my story. I believe that my ability to be culturally sensitive has been very important for the organization. –Local Agency Executive Director

It is not uncommon for any organization, including youth organizations, to experience the challenging dynamic in which staff who are themselves immigrants, or people of color, feel marginalized and isolated within larger staff or programming environments. Affected staff and their allies typically feel frustrated, offended, and angry at a personal and professional level. It's hard to believe that the organization is committed to inclusion of immigrants when this kind of marginalization can be observed in staff interactions.

Model openness to learning. It is crucial for leaders to create an organizational culture that encourages learning and open dialogue. Leaders must model inclusiveness if they are to discover their own biases and identify their “growing edges.” When they show themselves to be open to change, willing to address mistakes and ask for help, it encourages other staff to do the same and creates opportunities for staff experienced with immigrant populations to share their insight and expertise.

Value staff. Often, employees decide to commit to an organization because they feel like valued members of the work team. Creating an inclusive organizational culture where all youth and staff feel welcomed, valued, respected and supported by the organizational leadership has the benefit of:

- Attracting the best and brightest employees
- Increasing staff members' commitment to the agency
- Building effective teamwork
- Encouraging the kinds of conversations that lead to attitude change and the development of new skills.

Create supportive policies and structures. Leaders can also nurture inclusiveness by creating such organizational structures and policies such as a diversity task force, language classes for all staff members, translation or re-branding of organizational materials, anti-bias training, or release time for staff to attend local immigrant rights events.