

IDENTIFYING IDEAL STAFF CHARACTERISTICS



The transition to a new country and different culture becomes even more traumatic in this current political atmosphere. So many immigrant youth face social exclusion, marginalization, and other forms of discrimination. Some youth confront real physical danger or the threat of family separation, harassment, or deportation.

What does it take to work effectively with immigrant youth? The first and most basic requirement applies to all youth work—the staff member must be open minded, empathetic, resourceful, have good networking skills and a positive view of all youth. However, there are additional qualities and skills that are needed to be effective with immigrant children and youth.

Knowledge of Community and Immigrants' Experience

It's critical to identify staff who understand the cultural, historical and economic experience of immigrants. –Local Organization Director

The ideal staff person:

- Is aware of changing population demographics in the local community.
- Knows the specific circumstances and conditions in the home countries of immigrant participants.
- Understands the cultural customs, norms, and family structures of local immigrant communities. Youth workers can gain this knowledge in a number of ways—for example, by reviewing the literature or even reading novels written by authors within the target immigrant group. One of the most important methods of gaining knowledge is by learning directly from immigrant youth, parents, and community leaders. Ask questions, hold dialogue sessions, and most importantly listen.
- Understands the legal and political context of immigration in the U.S. at both the national and local level.

Cultural Competence

One has to be aware of things, like noise levels in homes, family backgrounds, and the importance of family—not just the father/mother but grandparents, other family members, other people who are close to the family. There are different attitudes towards what is respectful and what is not respectful—one child might raise his or her hand all the time, while that’s not going to happen with another child even though they both might know the same kind of information. –Agency Director

The ideal staff person:

- Can relate to individuals who come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.
- Understands and respects the fact that immigrants’ basic values, traditions, and beliefs may vary from those prevailing in the dominant culture.
- Avoids pre-judging participants on the basis of cultural backgrounds or treating individuals unjustly. It’s important to see each young person as an individual and set high expectations. People often underestimate the potential of immigrant youth because of language or cultural differences.
- Engages immigrant youth and families to get their buy-in, ownership, and input when designing programs and services for them.



Language Proficiency

The language, of course, makes a huge difference. And since most of our immigrants are from Sonora, most of our staff is able to converse with them very nicely. Sometimes we have folks come in from the Caribbean or from somewhere else where the Spanish is different. Then we really have to listen hard because of the regional differences, and then the cultural issues. –Agency Director

The ideal staff person:

- Provides services in the participants' language. This helps build trust and makes organizational environments more comfortable and welcoming. Since languages can vary by region (e.g. Mexican Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish, Cantonese from Mainland China, and Cantonese from Hong Kong), regional fluency may be needed to ensure accurate and meaningful communication.
- Ensures that written materials are translated or adapted so they are accessible to diverse immigrant groups.
- Recognizes that nonverbal communication cues and styles (eye-contact, gestures, etc.) can have different meanings in different cultures.

Ability to Relate to Immigrant Populations

It's beneficial to have some commonality—otherwise the distance between our staff and the people we're trying to serve is too great. My teen director is not an immigrant but she has fantastic international experience and has worked with all different types of groups. Because of her work and her interests, she's decreased that distance. It's not absolutely necessary to hire someone exactly from that group, but it has to be someone participants can relate to. –Agency Director

The ideal staff person:

- Reflects the immigrant population being served. Staff who have immigrated from the same country as participants have a deep understanding of the home culture, speak the same language, and have had the experience of transitioning to U.S. culture. These staff members are often able to gain trust from the participants, family, and the community.
- Shares the experience of being an immigrant. Staff who were born outside of the U.S., although not in the country that program participants come from, may also bring strong skills
- Is bicultural and bilingual, though not necessarily an immigrant.
- Has international experience. Staff who have lived in other countries, speak additional languages, and have cultural and international experience can also be particularly effective in working with immigrant youth and their families.

Connections with Families and Communities

One thing that we've learned is that you cannot build trust and respect with a community if you can't win over the parents. That just runs counter-culture for us— and when I say us, I mean Latinos. To send our kids to strangers to develop them or raise them, it's just not something that's done in Latin American countries. Well, I know the Catholic Church, for example, has youth services in Mexico and South America, but it's not something in the fabric of many Latin American countries. –Agency Director

- Accepts immigrant youth and families as participants who have a right to be here and receive services. Youth workers must be able to help foster an environment of acceptance within the organization, because immigrant participants, their families, and even immigrant staff can be subjected to overt and subtle anti-immigrant sentiment.
- Can make initial connections and build trust with participants' parents or caregivers. This is especially important, because many immigrants come from an experience where youth programs are not a part of their cultural tradition. Staff members who are able to speak in the family's native language will have an easier time building trusting connections. Having bilingual and bicultural immigrant staff who can do outreach in immigrant communities helps form a critical bridge between the youth organization and newcomer families.
- Networks effectively with members of the immigrant community. This includes activities such as becoming a visible entity in the specific community; meeting and building relationships with clergy members and other local leaders; attending and supporting events in the community; collaborating with schools to help immigrant youth and their families make a successful transition.

Nurturing Community Champions

Camp Fire USA, Central Puget Sound in Seattle, WA partnered with a national research organization to identify immigrant populations living in their community, and to determine the needs of those diverse groups. The study also sought to identify individual community leaders with strong community connections who could serve as "community champions." This initiative has been critical in helping Camp Fire USA, Central Puget Sound in Seattle build relationships and connect with community resources. For example, the community champions have helped the organization find and hire qualified staff members.