

# Multicultural Organizational Development in Nonprofit Organizations: Lessons from the Cultural Competence Learning Initiative

A 2008-2010 initiative of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services  
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## Introduction and Context

### Purpose of this document

What does it take to integrate cultural competence into the day-to-day operations of a community-based nonprofit organization? Once the work is started, how do you move it to the next level and sustain an ongoing process? The Cultural Competence Learning Initiative (CCLI) was initiated by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services [[www.compasspoint.org](http://www.compasspoint.org)] to contribute to learning and practice around these questions. Through this project, funded by The California Endowment, eleven community-based nonprofit organizations involved in improving community health outcomes received multicultural organizational development support from a CompassPoint consultant team.

This document is geared towards individual organizations, funders, or practitioners of cultural competence and multicultural organizational development. It shares lessons from the project to inform work in the field and provides practical examples of how participating organizations addressed different areas of cultural competence. Several tools and templates created as a part of this initiative can be accessed through hyperlinks provided in this document. The paper is written from the point of view of the project's lead consultants, Laurin Mayeno of Mayeno Consulting and Steve Lew of CompassPoint, and is informed by the experience and insights of participants.

### Project Background

CCLI launched in fall 2008 and built on a three-monograph series produced by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services in 2007 entitled *Organizational Development & Capacity in Cultural Competence: Building Knowledge and Practice* [[www.compasspoint.org/content/index.php?pid=19#Ccomp](http://www.compasspoint.org/content/index.php?pid=19#Ccomp)]. The idea behind this project was to work with a cohort of organizations to see what new lessons emerged in practice. Each of the eleven participating organizations received 60-65 hours of consulting tailored to their goals. Several organizations took part in a series of workshops on multicultural organizational development to build their capacity for leading the work. CompassPoint also became a participant of the project and underwent its own process of multicultural organizational development. Several key documents that emerged from this work, such as CompassPoint's multicultural vision, values, and commitments statement [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1171\\_visionformulticulturaldev.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1171_visionformulticulturaldev.pdf)], are shared on the website for the Cultural Competence Learning Initiative at [www.compasspoint.org/ccli](http://www.compasspoint.org/ccli).

This initiative began as the 2008 economic recession started to hit local communities and nonprofit operating budgets. Even though consulting time on the project was subsidized through a CompassPoint grant from The California Endowment, the scope and pace of work with many participants became more limited and slowed as they reprioritized activities to address urgent organizational matters like reductions in staff and program closures. It was initially anticipated that work with groups would take 5-8 months; instead, the typical project stretched to 6-14 months. Despite the immense challenges that groups were facing, organizations continued to commit the time and energy needed to support ongoing multicultural development; many even developed comprehensive multiyear plans. The San Francisco organization, New Leaf: Services for Our Community, provides a detailed example of a multicultural plan [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1167\\_multiculturalplan.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1167_multiculturalplan.pdf)]. [Note: At the time of printing, New Leaf announced its closure after 35 years of service. As a legacy to its important efforts through CCLI, the organization agreed to share its multicultural development plan so that its work could inform and be adapted by other organizations in their multicultural capacity building.]

### Definitions of Common Terms

**Cultural competence:** A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. (Cross, T., B.J. Bazron et al., *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care: Volume 1*. Washington, D.C.: National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health, Georgetown University Child Development Center, 1989, p. iv.)

**Multicultural organizational development:** A philosophy and practical approach that can help organizations to realize the potential of diversity through strategies aimed at personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. (Mayeno, L., "Multicultural Organizational Development," in *Multicultural Organizational Development: A Resource for Health Equity*. San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and The California Endowment, July 2007, p. 1.)

## Overview of participating organizations

The organizations that participated in CCLI provide a range of human services related to community health and wellness for underserved populations in the San Francisco Bay Area. Their services include community building and community development, family services, housing support, mental health services, primary prevention and health promotion, information and referral, primary care, substance abuse treatment, and youth development. Their annual budgets span from \$250,000 to \$15 million. Some have fewer than ten staff people, while the majority of the organizations have more than 30 staff at multiple sites. Each organization had previous experience and ongoing activities related to cultural competence efforts. As a precondition to participating, each organization was required to have its leadership's commitment and involvement in its multicultural work. Accordingly, in most organizations senior directors participated with staff from throughout the organization in their workgroups.

### Participating Organizations

Arab Cultural and Community Center  
Brighter Beginnings  
Catholic Charities CYO  
Community Awareness and Treatment Services  
CompassPoint Nonprofit Services  
Family Support Services of the East Bay  
Girls Inc. of Alameda County  
Glide Foundation  
New Leaf Services  
Our Family Coalition  
Stop AIDS Project  
Women's Cancer Resource Center

## Organization of the document

In **Section I**, we discuss five *Building Blocks for a Sustainable Process*. We identified these essential elements for sustaining a process of multicultural organizational change based on our experience in the initiative. For each building block, we provide examples of work from participating organizations.

In **Section II**, we share five *Lessons Learned* from this project. These lessons were drawn from the experience of the consultants as well as comments and reports from participants.

In **Section III**, we summarize some of the *Impacts of Multicultural Development Work* that emerged from the initiative, including outcomes within the organization and changes in service delivery.

## I Building Blocks for a Sustainable Process


What are the key building blocks for developing and sustaining a process of multicultural development in an organization? Based on our work with participating organizations, we identified five elements that are important for a successful process. These building blocks are interconnected and each one supports development of the others.



### 1. Alignment and investment of organizational players

A crucial aspect of the work was building individual and group investment in addressing issues of culture and difference at a deeper level. Aligning champions, leaders, and other players in the organization was identified as essential to engaging the entire organization in integrating cultural competence into its day-to-day work. Key to achieving this was surfacing and clarifying assumptions about culture and difference in a way that drew from people's personal experiences and that was relevant to their work. As a result, they could define cultural competence and multiculturalism in a way that resonated with their personal values rather than as a meaningless buzzword, obligation, or chore.

The level of organizational engagement and agreement differed depending on the agency's structure and stage of



the process. For example, Women’s Cancer Resource Center (WCRC) has a small staff and a large pool of volunteers, including groups focused specifically in the African American and Latino communities. WCRC engaged staff and volunteers in a series of community dialogues to develop “Principles of Cultural Humility” to guide the organization. Principles, such as “Recognize diversity within each cultural group” and “Respect my own boundaries and those of others,” emerged from staff and volunteers’ work with women with cancer from diverse backgrounds. By engaging constituents from different segments of its work, the organization was able to establish shared ownership, investment, and a sense of community that had not previously existed. WCRC’s finalized Principles of Cultural Humility [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1170\\_principlesofculturalhumil.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1170_principlesofculturalhumil.pdf)] were introduced at its annual volunteer recognition event and are being integrated into staff and volunteer orientation materials and activities. Ongoing community dialogues are also being instituted to break down silos between distinct community projects and contribute to a unified multicultural organization.

## 2. Leadership development

Work on CCLI underscored the importance of cultivating and developing strong, cohesive leadership in an organization’s cultural competence effort to establish a clear focus, maintain momentum, and address challenges that arise. Management’s commitment was essential to assuring that multiculturalism was integrated into existing structures and practices, rather than remaining on the sidelines. Champions who were not part of the management structure also play an important leadership role in most organizations. It is generally recommended that both managers and non-managers be involved so multicultural organizational development isn’t a top-down driven process; this also helps ensure that the perspectives of program and line staff, who often are closer to clients and their needs, are incorporated. In several instances in CCLI, a multicultural work group provided a structure for these formal and informal leaders to work in partnership.

The multicultural processes required that this mix of leaders stretch beyond their usual patterns of leadership in order to establish new patterns within their organizations. Requirements of leadership included:

- *A commitment to do what it takes to keep cultural competence on the organizational agenda. This was particularly challenging in light of competing demands, shrinking resources, and the new level of challenge placed on leaders to sustain their organizations during the economic crisis.*
- *Skills and willingness to engage in “courageous conversations” that address uncomfortable or controversial topics related to multiculturalism. It was also especially powerful when leaders modeled multicultural skills.*

- *A capacity to listen openly to different ideas, perspectives, and concerns. When leaders listened openly and non-defensively they gained important information and insights about what works and what could work better. Their listening and timely responses were also essential to engendering trust in the process among staff and other organizational players.*

At Family Support Services of the Bay Area (FSSBA), the Senior Managers Team held responsibility for leading the organization’s cultural competence work. This group took on several recommendations that emerged from an “Undoing Racism” workshop that staff attended. These senior managers recognized that they needed a common language and foundation to move the process forward, unify the agency, and provide leadership for the process. They spent time working with their consultant to clarify assumptions and roles, build trust, and clarify ways to respond proactively to staff recommendations.

The team of ten managers met every other month but had had difficulty maintaining forward momentum and clear direction. Although individual managers were doing the work within their departments and programs, they didn’t have a clear picture of how to move it forward on an agencywide level. The executive director, a white woman, also recognized that she had not asserted leadership to keep the process moving, because she was trying to step back to allow people of color to lead. These dynamics changed as the executive director began to provide more leadership. In addition, a subgroup of the Senior Managers Team, including the executive director, was established with responsibility for providing direction and follow up for the process as a whole.

After the Senior Managers Team worked together for several months, an agencywide training and dialogue titled “Race, Power & Privilege: Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression” was held and attended by all salaried staff, about 65 people. To encourage open dialogue, the managers made a shared commitment to the staff that there would be no negative repercussions for raising issues and concerns. As a result of their work together, the managers were able to engage throughout the day as a unified team and model open communication and courageous conversations with the rest of the staff.

## 3. Shifting cultural norms

Participating organizations established new cultural norms internally and opened up forums for courageous conversations on topics that weren’t typically discussed. Most organizations worked on shifting these norms by adopting communication guidelines, modeling new communication behaviors, and building their practice through dialogues and discussion forums. Through these efforts, organizations “exercised a new muscle” to initiate and engage in courageous conversations. Questions like “Why aren’t we keeping people of color in key positions?” or “What kinds of questions should we be asking

clients about their culture?" began to be normalized as part of day-to-day activity.

Girls Inc. of Alameda County's Core (Cultural Competence) Team worked closely with its Senior Leadership Team to use its planning process as an opportunity to shift cultural norms. The team convened structured dialogues with defined dialogue questions [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1166\\_dialoguequestions.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1166_dialoguequestions.pdf)] to engage its staff of over 100 employees in the process. Joint meetings and retreats of the Core Team and Senior Leadership Team gave these leaders the opportunity to build a shared foundation to lead these dialogues throughout the organization. Discussions with staff groups were held to elicit ideas, opinions, and experiences to inform development of a plan. Staff, departmental, and program meetings were also used as forums to promote conversation. The leaders used communication guidelines [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1164\\_communicationguidelines.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1164_communicationguidelines.pdf)] and were intentional about setting a tone that encouraged open communication and learning.

#### 4. Articulating and codifying assumptions and commitments

Most groups were committed to addressing issues of culture and difference, but didn't have a shared understanding of what that meant for their organizations. For example, in one organization some staff focused on racism and inclusion of people of color, whereas others wanted to address other "isms" like ageism or gender bias. In another organization, some wanted to talk about racism and other "isms" to build awareness and strengthen interactions. Others in that organizations believed that this type of discussion was not relevant in the work environment. Such differences in defining and focusing the work sometimes led to conflict or lack of direction.

When people had the opportunity to talk through their assumptions and commitments, they usually reached greater investment and alignment on direction. Codifying these assumptions into written documents provided a means to communicate the ideas and institutionalize cultural competence into the fabric of the organization on an ongoing basis.

For CompassPoint, this process helped to clarify how the organization saw its role as an agent of change with nonprofits. As a result of the multicultural process, the organization made a commitment to "[s]erve as an active steward or agent of change for addressing issues of culture and power at all levels, including the nonprofit field. This includes building leadership from diverse communities and fostering dialogue and action." This perspective about the organization's role was also integrated into CompassPoint's theory of change [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1165\\_cpworkingtheoryofchangeju.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1165_cpworkingtheoryofchangeju.pdf)].

#### 5. Clarifying responsibility and authority for moving the process forward

For many organizations, the responsibilities related to MCOB don't fit within existing structures or job responsibilities. Often, a multicultural committee is established without a clear charge or clear linkages to decision making throughout the organization, which results in marginalizing the work.

One way to address this concern is to include administrative, operations, and program staff in the work groups. This can strengthen linkages between key organizational areas. It is also necessary to clarify organizationwide responsibility and authority to decide and implement plans. Unless this happens, there may be an expectation that the work group alone is responsible for the MCOB work. Clarifying the charge of different entities helps to assure that the work is integral, rather than marginalized, within the organization [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1168\\_multiculturalworkgroupcha.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1168_multiculturalworkgroupcha.pdf)]. The following definitions of responsibilities and authority worked well for many groups:

**Multicultural Work Group:** This group creates the organizational/project plans and monitors performance in meeting the goals and objectives of the plan. The work group provides recommendations on an ongoing basis to management, and sometimes assists with implementation.

**Directors/Senior Managers:** These leaders approve the plan and then are responsible for carrying it out within the existing systems and structure. They are accountable to the Multicultural Work Group for the successful integration of this work and for managing the implementation.

**Board of Directors:** The board approves the multicultural plans, holds the organization accountable to achieving important outcomes in the plan, and is accountable to the Multicultural Work Group for implementing multicultural objectives within the board.



## II Lessons Learned

In this section, we present five lessons that emerged as most common and important to participating organizations in developing and implementing their multicultural organizational development plans.

### 1. Pay attention to acknowledging and building upon the organization's history with cultural competence.

All of the participating nonprofits had some history of work in cultural competence. As a result, they carried both rich experiences to build upon and baggage to overcome. In these instances, a foundation for moving forward includes learning from past experiences, honoring and building on the work that has been done, and acknowledging the efforts and commitment of the people who were involved. It is also important to be thoughtful about how to engage the people who were involved as the organization moves ahead.

In one organization, a committee had been working to address cultural competence for several years. The committee had conducted a number of activities and developed a definition statement and communication guidelines. Some members of the committee voiced concerns that the organization had not taken its efforts seriously.

The senior leaders responsible for moving the process forward were faced with two different sets of needs. On the one hand, there was a need to establish a group of people that could take responsibility for moving cultural competence forward on an agency level. On the other hand, there was a need to ensure that the work of the previous committee would not get lost and that the people who did that work would be valued and included in the process.

These issues were addressed in the following ways: A new committee was established that included previous committee members and new members who could help engage the entire agency in the process. The consultant team conducted interviews with previous committee members and senior leaders. Members of the previous group participated in a workshop with the new group and senior leaders. Dialogues including all staff were convened. These interviews, training, and dialogues invited staff to share their thoughts and lessons learned from past experience and their perspectives on what did and didn't work. The work products of the previous committee served as a starting point for this new phase of work.

### 2. Balance the internal development and work of the team with the need to engage the whole staff and maintain transparency and momentum.

One of the biggest challenges in the process was managing multiple levels of engagement. One level was the internal work of the multicultural work group, which included capacity building and activities related to deliverables, such as guiding principles and workplans, making client space more welcoming to all groups, and creating new hiring policies. Another level was staff engagement, which involved surveys, trainings, dialogues, staff report-backs, and interfacing with the management team. Managing these different levels was particularly demanding for multicultural work group members, given that their committee work was in addition to their primary job functions.

In one organization, the multicultural work group took several meetings to clarify its role and direction. Meanwhile, staff was not informed about the process and concerns about lack of transparency began to surface. In order to address the concerns and to maintain momentum, the team identified ways for people to engage in the process, including immediate activities that could be initiated without having to wait for the plan to be completed. In one of the larger organizations, the communications manager, as a member of her organization's multicultural work group, developed internal newsletters to keep staff updated. Strong staff communication was essential to the process.

### 3. Acknowledge that individuals will have different reactions and different levels of receptivity to the process.

Part of being culturally competent is recognizing and allowing for people to be in different places with regards to the cultural competence process. For example, in one organization there was a difference among senior managers about whether it was appropriate to talk about racism and other "isms" in the workplace. One woman of color shared her concern that people of color, who deal with racism constantly in their daily lives, should not have to relive it in the workplace by discussing the topic. In another organization, there were several people of color who mistrusted the process based on how it had been handled in the past; they were concerned that racism wouldn't be confronted head on. And some white staff members were reluctant to engage for fear of being attacked or blamed. In all of these instances, dialogue was key to sharing and understanding different perspectives and finding common ground for moving ahead.

#### 4. Don't let resisters set the pace for the process.

While acknowledging differences, it is important not to allow the people who are most resistant to hold the process back for everyone else. Organizations that operate by consensus can get stuck when a handful of people oppose change. When organizations faced resistance, it was important to hear the resisters and address their concerns without waiting for them to get on board before moving forward. It was possible, and often necessary, to continue advancing a multicultural change process without expecting full agreement at the outset. For example, one organization that is working to transform its culture conducted transformational trainings with different teams and programs to build a critical mass of people engaged in the change process. As others within the organization saw the changes in how these teams were functioning, interest in the process grew.

#### 5. Courageous conversations offer opportunities for learning and growth.

In most organizations, discussions of culture, power, and difference are not a norm. Typically, these discussions are uncomfortable and even threatening for the people who raise the issues and for the people in positions of power. When we avoid these conversations we lose the opportunity to proactively address these issues, enrich our working relationships, and enhance the effectiveness of our work. When participating organizations developed the capacity to engage in courageous conversations without shaming and blaming people, tremendous learning and growth occurred for everyone involved. People learned to understand the experiences and perspectives of people who are different from themselves. They also learned to see commonality in their experiences.

In one organization, courageous conversations allowed staff to address the impact of internalized racism on interactions between staff and program participants of the same culture. In another, people were able to reflect on how their own communication styles might be perceived by others and understand each other's need for effective and productive communication.



## Impacts of Multicultural Development Work on Clients and Community

Each of the participating groups created organizational practices that would ultimately impact its clients and the larger communities it serves. Following are examples of organizational outcomes that were realized or significant progress that was made:

#### Increased multicultural capacity of staff.

At New Leaf, the multicultural development process supported the recruitment of more diverse clinical interns, staff, and volunteer clinicians. This investment made a big difference in the delivery of services to diverse populations. It improved the organization's ability to fulfill client requests for therapists of color, transgender therapists, and Spanish-speaking clinicians. Over the course of the initiative, New Leaf's work group also revised the organization's "community identities" form to better facilitate matching of providers and clients based on clients' backgrounds and preferences.

Through client surveys conducted as a part of multicultural assessment, CompassPoint's multicultural work group learned that African American and Latino clients gauged the organization's services slightly less favorably than other ethnic and cultural groups. Throughout the two years of this project, staff reflected on CompassPoint's work culture, the recruitment process, and the quality of relationships with people and organizations in these communities. As a result of more focused attention to recruitment and cultivation of relationships, the organization has made significant progress in hiring from these communities.

In both examples, attention was paid to building the capacity of all staff to work effectively across differences through ongoing training and integrating multicultural practices into day-to-day work. For New Leaf, staff had difficulty discussing cultural differences in monthly agencywide case consultation and peer review; as a result of the initiative these topics were integrated into clinical trainings, through the use of diverse cultural examples, discussion, and learning opportunities that provided staff multiple options for ongoing reading and experiential learning on an individual basis. New Leaf gave staff the opportunity to "Pick Your Own Multicultural Homework" [[www.compasspoint.org/assets/1169\\_pickyourownmulticulturalh.pdf](http://www.compasspoint.org/assets/1169_pickyourownmulticulturalh.pdf)] from a list of assignments with varying intensities. This list was created with the understanding that individuals have varying levels of multicultural competency and allowed staff to tailor their "homework" to their particular multicultural development needs.

#### Increased language capacity.

Many organizations have found it difficult to increase their capacity to provide information and services in multiple languages during this period of shrinking budgets and lay-



offs. The multicultural planning work at Girls Inc. helped it to identify ways to prioritize language access across the organization and draw more upon internal resources. Several bilingual staff needed ongoing support to assist with interpretation services, Spanish-led groups, and material translation. These individuals are now meeting regularly as a Spanish-language group to help each other improve their written and speaking skills. Rather than limiting this group to program staff, Girls Inc. is involving staff across the organization to create a system that thoughtfully leverages the language skills of all staff.

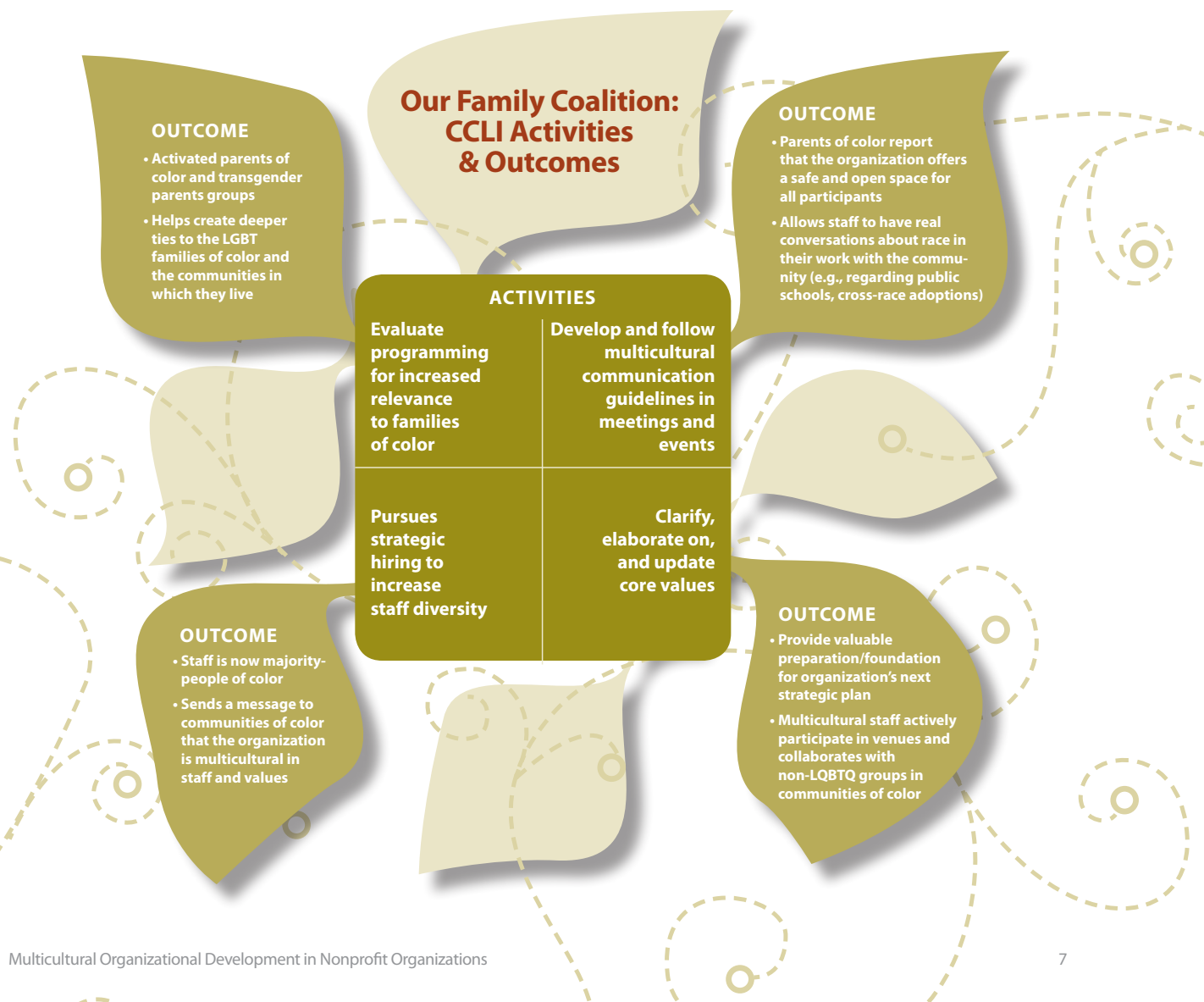
### Stronger relationships with clients and community.

Our Family Coalition promotes the civil rights and well-being of Bay Area lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) families with children and prospective parents through education, advocacy, social networking, and grassroots community organizing. Its work through CCLI with parents of color, transgender parents, and non-LGBTQ groups based in communities of color yielded many outcomes among the board and staff that are beginning

to increase the organization’s impact in the community. The graphic below shows some of the major multicultural capacity-building decisions and activities the organization pursued and the resulting outcomes.

## Conclusion

Our experiences with the Cultural Competence Learning Initiative affirmed that it is possible to build multiculturalism into the fabric and day-to-day functioning of an organization. It also deepened our appreciation for the tremendous complexity and challenge involved in doing this work. A multicultural organizational development approach requires strong leadership, persistence, and courage. It involves breaking out of “business as usual” to ask tough questions, create new ways of interacting, and engage many people in different ways. It requires a spirit of learning and willingness to take risks to try new things. In such an “inside out” approach, the most immediate changes occur internally to the organization. This work builds a solid foundation for developing greater capacity to serve diverse populations, improve access to services, and achieve stronger, healthier communities.





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## About CompassPoint

CompassPoint Nonprofit Services is a consulting, research, and training organization providing nonprofits with management tools, strategies, and resources to lead change in their communities. With a presence in San Francisco, the East Bay, and Silicon Valley, we work with community-based nonprofits in executive transition, planning, boards of directors, finance systems and business planning, fundraising, and technology.

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## About Mayeno Consulting

Laurin Mayeno has over 30 years experience with nonprofit, public, and philanthropic organizations serving diverse populations. Her consulting practice, Mayeno Consulting, builds the capacity and power of people to create systems, services, and communities that work for everyone. She supports leaders and teams to integrate a multicultural perspective, authentic communication, and shared leadership into the day-to-day culture and practices of organizations.

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