VISIONS' Eight (8) Guiding Principles for Successful Outcomes Across Cultural Differences

Successful outcomes across cultural differences are more likely to occur when agreed upon guiding principles are used. The principles below have been successfully used in VISIONS' consultations, trainings, coaching, and technical assistance interventions for 20 years. In addition to the successful interactions made possible by using these guidelines, they also have been used to lead organizational change efforts. The examples following each principle are drawn from various interventions in the course of VISIONS' consultation practice.

1. **"Try on"** is an invitation to be open-minded to others' ideas, feelings, world views and ways of doing things so that greater exploration and understanding are possible. The invitation also includes feeling free to take those things that "fit" and to leave or file away those things that don't fit.

   A white first generation Italian male believes his working class family had it as hard as Blacks. A second generation white Italian female believes it was harder for Blacks. In an effort to "try on" his way of thinking, she asks specific questions about his experience, rather than immediately judging him as "racist". She was willing to "try on" his worldview.

2. **"It's Ok to disagree**" assumes that disagreement is not only inevitable but can help individuals and groups produce better outcomes. By acknowledging what we have in common **and** by recognizing, understanding, and appreciating what is different between us, individuals and groups can shift the pressure to "be", "think", or "act" the same into permission to generate all possible ideas and strategies. This guideline assumes we can disagree and still stay connected and do great work.

   A white woman believes that if other women and people of color worked hard and assumed more responsibility they too could get ahead. From her perspective, there is no need for recruitment, retention and training programs. Another white woman disagrees. She believes there are barriers of prejudice and unfair practices that keep women and people of color from moving up. She shares her difficult experiences working in a traditionally male-dominated organization and the challenges she has faced getting hired, promoted and supported in her leadership efforts.

3. **"It's not OK to blame, shame or attack ourselves or others"** assumes that most of us have learned well how to show our disagreement by making the other person wrong. This happens in direct, indirect, verbal and non-verbal ways. When we attack, shame, or blame ourselves and others, we are less likely to take in what others are sharing and less likely to problem-solve across our differences.

   A white male continually expressed feelings of guilt and shame while blaming himself and other whites for the history of racism. This "guilt and shame" seemed to hinder his willingness to explore how he had learned racism and can now unlearn it by grieving the pain and costs of the past and taking responsibility now for his attitudes and behaviors in the present without blaming himself for the past.

4. **"Practice self-focus"** assumes that our learning about differences can be accelerated and maximized when we listen to our internal thoughts, feelings and reactions. When we find ourselves getting irritated with someone about cultural differences, we can blame or shame them or ourselves, or we can figure out internally what is causing our irritation. An effective tool for practicing self focus is using "I", rather than "we", "you", or "one" statements. When we intend to refer to others, be specific about who those others are -- by name or group. In addition, when speaking about our own experience or opinion, use "I have found....." or " I think, I feel, I believe ..." and include feeling words, e.g. mad, sad, scared, happy, relieved, etc.

   A person of color talked about her anger towards white managers, who, she believed, were not recruiting and hiring people of color in the organization. Rather than argue about the improved conditions for people of color and quote figures about the increased numbers in supervisory and leadership roles, a white manager in the group self-focused on the initial anger he felt about being judged and the scare he felt about

the anger in the voice of the person of color. With that self focus, the white manager was better able to listen, honor, and respect the person of color's feelings and later share his feelings. He then knew he wanted to follow-up with specific questions about how the person of color saw him as a part of the problem without blaming or shaming himself or the person of color.

5. **"Notice both the process and content"** means notice both, "what we say", "how "and "why" we say or do something and how the members of the group react. For example, notice who's active and who's not, who's comfortable and who's not, who's interested and who's not, including ourselves. Ask about both the process and content, and share our own thoughts and feelings too.

   A female presenter is sharing how her experience of men dominating meetings made it harder for her to speak up and share her ideas and opinions in meetings chaired by males. Two male participants do not appear to be interested. They are having side conversations, are seated partially away from the group's circle and are sometimes gazing out of the window, and making comments about women in their workplace who are "too outspoken" and create problems by staying out with their children and taking maternity leave. The female presenter asks each of the male participants to focus on the possible connections between their behavior in the group (process) and the examples she has given (content).

6. **"Practice "both/and" thinking"** invites us to see that more than one reality or perspective can be true at the same time (diunital thinking) rather than seeing reality as strictly either/or, right or wrong, good or bad, this or that (dichotomous thinking). Using "both/and thinking" can be very helpful in reconciling differences and conflicts that do not present easy solutions.

   The reception area in a human services facility was being remodeled. The single male project coordinator had not planned space for children. A woman on the project committee advocated for a play area. In contrast, the project coordinator believed that parents should bring books and toys to entertain their children and that the elderly clients would not be comfortable with a child play area. Together, they decided the space could be planned to include areas for people desiring a quiet place and areas for the activities of the children. They found a solution that addressed both of their realities rather than one over the other.

7. **"Be aware of both the intent and impact of your actions"** invites us to consider that in cross cultural interactions, our intent might not match our impact. When we have a negative impact on others across culture, ensuring a successful outcome requires changing that negative impact. This guideline requires a willingness to take risks and to exchange and receive honest feedback about the impact of our words and actions on others. It is possible to be well-intentioned AND still say and do hurtful things. To be successful across differences, we must be willing to shift our behaviors and actions such that people who are different from us feel fully valued and included.

   A U.S. born citizen made statements about people coming to this country, not learning English and not attempting to fit into the United States' culture but rather expecting the United States to change to meet their needs. The other participants heard his statements as negative, uncaring and resentful towards immigrants. Through discussion, the man learned that his passionate desire for immigrants to learn English, fit in and be included was not being heard; rather, the impact of his words and passion was to communicate anger, exclusion, racism, classism and opposition to change. He realized that the impact of his comments about immigrants was perceived differently than his intent.

8. **"Confidentiality"** invites us to honor personal sharing and to not repeat personal details outside of the group. Confidentiality assumes that feeling free to share in one setting, does not translate into comfort in other settings. So, if we want to bring up information related to a person's sharing in other settings, we need to privately ask the person if it is acceptable to do so. Confidentiality also assumes that we will not use

something someone has shared to hurt them, get them, or punish them later. This is especially important for work groups or teams involving multiple staff or organizational levels. Participants are encouraged to freely share their learnings about theory, practice and themselves in any setting of their choice.

> ***Two women students, in a discussion group with a confidentiality guideline, share with a diversity officer examples of anti-female comments made by male faculty members in classes – e.g. 'girls come to college to catch husbands', 'certain traditionally male professions now have high divorce rates because of the hot women entering the profession', etc. The diversity officer, without the students' permission, shares those examples in the dean's leadership group to demonstrate how serious the problem of sexism is within the faculty. Again trying to be helpful, a member of the Dean's Leadership group repeats the examples in another setting, and the examples eventually get back to the women students who then feel that they cannot trust the diversity officer with confidential information about their experiences.***

Clients and organizations have found this tool to be helpful in identifying, implementing and tracking personal and organizational change from a multicultural perspective. We asks our clients and ourselves to assess which of these guiding principles they (we) are using well and which are they (we) violating or finding more difficult, both personally and organizationally. Recognizing, understanding, appreciating and fully utilizing all cultural perspectives increases the likelihood that successful outcomes will occur in our organizations and businesses.

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VISIONS, Inc. was established in 1984 as a nonprofit, educational corporation. Among its founders were three African American women from Rocky Mount, North Carolina and a Jewish male from a northeast family of activists. ***VISIONS*** has a core group of 30 consultants who represent a wide range of cultural backgrounds and professional experiences with expertise in psychology, education, law, business, organizational development, community organizing, advocacy, communications, meeting facilitation, strategic planning, conflict resolution and health. ***VISIONS*** has expertise in multiculturalism awareness and change; organizational development and change; executive coaching; managing transitions; train the trainer programs; empowerment of target groups/communities (people of color, lower wealth, women, working class, gay/lesbian/bisexual, etc; and multi-level change by non-target groups/communities (Whites, men, managers, middle-class, heterosexual, Christians etc.). ***VISIONS'*** work is done nationally and internationally and offices are located in the northeast, south and west coast – U.S. and South Africa. ***VISIONS*** has a broad client base in both the private and public sectors.