

Refugees and Cultural Humility at Buffalo String Works

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Suggest ideas for creating an organizational culture of respect for diversity and concern for all members and constituents.
- Recognize cultural barriers that prevent the advancement of an organizational mission.
- Recommend strategies that demonstrate cultural humility.

Topics For Discussion

Cultural and Organizational Diversity

Buffalo String Works is a music academy that has been serving refugee and immigrant families with lessons on string instruments since 2014. Students today span kindergarten through high school and come from a number of different schools in and around Buffalo. Most however are brought by families who have fled the country of Myanmar in particular. Located in an area of Buffalo known for its cultural diversity, the organization seeks to fulfill its mission “to foster vibrant, inclusive communities through the transformative power of music.” With its targeted student population, Buffalo String Works uses music as a means to helping students become comfortably integrated into society.

- What circumstances led to the founding of Buffalo String Works? What resources were available to the founders to allow for a strong start?
- How is Buffalo String Works mission consonant with the well-known El Sistema philosophy of music education? In what ways does the organization have room to grow into this global model?
- How is the faculty at Buffalo String Works structured? What obstacles have always existed at the academy?
- Explain how inclusivity and cultural sensitivity were addressed at Buffalo String Works in its infancy as an organization.
- The case describes the enrollment of eight Somali students in group violin lessons. After six students dropped out quickly of Buffalo String Works, two of the students displayed particularly undisciplined behavior.
 - ♦ How was the situation handled? What could have been done at the time?

- ♦ There was speculation among teachers at Buffalo String Works that the Somali culture values the practice of music differently than other cultures, such as those in Europe and North America. If true, how might this change the response of the teachers toward Somali students in the future?

Organizational Strategy

The enrollment expansion of Buffalo String Works from 17 students to more than 90 within five years has forced the academy to become more disciplined as an arts organization. Part of this discipline has involved developing a strategic planning document for the enterprise with goals set for the near future. The board of directors and a management consultant approved the strategic plan given in **Appendix 1**.

- What three themes were identified in the strategy document and what action areas were articulated for each? Explore areas of the business not addressed in the case; invite students to pick an action area that sounds intriguing based on the materials presented and discuss its merits or disadvantages in the context of the overall plan.
 - ♦ The search for a new location is of particular interest to Executive Director Yuki Numata Resnick. What suggestions are made in the plan for expansion and what aspects are most compelling?
 - ♦ Ideas for how to measure success of an institution like Buffalo String Works are also on the minds of board members looking for ways to grow the business. How will metrics ultimately strengthen Buffalo String Works? What action steps for gathering metrics have been approved and what do students think is the likelihood of success?
- The case focused generally on the leadership category in the strategic plan for Buffalo String Works and on the action area of “onboarding” in particular. How is the concept of onboarding understood in the context of the goals set for its teachers?
 - ♦ Five “activities” were listed under the onboarding category with the aim of forming a “safe, effective, and encouraging team culture” at Buffalo String Works. The case focused only on Activity 4. Of the remaining activities, which seem most actionable and crucial to the organization’s success after its five years of operation?
 - ♦ Activity 4 involves the goal to provide staff training in seven areas. Which areas are most urgent based on the background given in the case on the organization? No action steps are given formally in the strategy document for each of the seven recommendations. Probe the students to see how they might approach some or all of these areas.

Cultural Humility

The case of Buffalo String Works leads to a scenario focused on the question of cultural humility. Having built an extracurricular program entirely of refugee and immigrant students, Buffalo String Works was, on one hand, providing a social benefit for these vulnerable children, who need outlets that encourage cultural integration. At the same time, the teaching staff was ill-equipped to handle the barriers that seemed to stand between the students and them. Yuki contacted her colleague Isok Kim, who specializes in cultural competency and humility in the area of social work, to help guide teachers through three sessions on the topic. Cultural humility is an idea encompassing self-awareness of cultural biases and inherent respect toward individuals of other cultures.

- Prof. Kim introduced the “identity wheel” in his first meeting with the teachers of Buffalo String Works. What was the goal of this exercise? Invite students to complete the wheel for themselves. Discuss how this simple exercise often becomes a revelation to many.

- How were the second and third sessions conducted? In what ways did Prof. Kim build on the identity wheel exercise from the first workshop?
- Cultural humility and cultural competency are “processes” rather than things that can be fully acquired or achieved in a classroom or workshop. As he wrapped up his time at Buffalo String Works, Prof. Kim tried to encourage the teachers to find commonalities with students and emphasize the common good instead of the impediments that stood between many teachers and students. Music was an obvious connective tissue. What other aspects could help harmonize the culture of Buffalo String Works to bring all parties together more cohesively?
- As the new full-time executive director, Yuki scheduled the training sessions with Isok Kim, but also wanted to see marked improvement in the area of cultural humility. Teachers were not sure how precisely the substance of the workshops could take immediate effect. What could Yuki do to monitor the lasting impact of the cultural humility sessions? What could she do to continue or reinforce the training now that the facilitator had completed his work?
 - ♦ How could the cultural competency training become institutionalized as professional development at Buffalo String Works?
 - ♦ How would new teachers encounter the training and how could current instructors continue their education in cultural humility?
- Since Buffalo String Works aims to develop “vibrant, inclusive communities” through its music, Yuki is considering ideas to incorporate student families more broadly in the ideas presented by Isok Kim. How could they be involved? Ultimately, how can this training benefit the wider Buffalo community?