

PAS QUICKNOTES

Cultural Humility in Planning

A core responsibility of planning practice is building communities of [belonging](#). A critical part of creating the conditions necessary to foster belonging is *cultural humility*. Originating in the [health-care field](#), cultural humility involves an ongoing process of self-exploration combined with a willingness to learn from others that honors the beliefs, customs, and values of all people. Through cultural humility, planners can enhance their [active listening](#), [empathy](#), and compassion skills, deepening understanding and buy-in for establishing communities of belonging.

BACKGROUND

Culture encompasses the shared values, behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes of a group of people, and it shapes the way we think, act, and interact. Different ways of thinking about others' cultures have implications for behavior and change. *Cultural awareness* acknowledges that people come from different cultures but does not seek broader understanding or prompt behavior change. *Cultural sensitivity* recognizes that people of different cultures see the world in equally valid ways, but may not change broader practices that could exclude others. *Cultural competency* focuses on showing respect by learning about other cultures and advocating for policies that support collective well-being, but the focus on learning through "mastery of skills" can lead to [stereotyping](#) of others and perpetuate power imbalances.

Cultural humility, in contrast, involves a lifelong commitment to learning about and honoring the beliefs, customs, and values of others while evaluating and critiquing our own. It seeks to change systems and disrupt power dynamics that make it challenging for all cultures to be valued. It builds mutual understanding and makes community members feel valued and respected, laying the groundwork for planning work that fosters community well-being and inclusive development.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL HUMILITY

By intentionally centering cultural humility in their work, planners can ensure that their influence on policy and decision-making creates positive outcomes for all community members. It can also help to make planners' work less stressful and more fulfilling.

- **Strengthens community planning.** Cultural humility requires active listening skills that can help planners deepen existing relationships and establish new connections with community members who were left out of previous planning processes.
- **Builds empathy and compassion.** When we listen intently, we are more curious about others and more open to connection, understanding, and collaboration. Cultural humility is grounded in the truth that we all carry wisdom. This facilitates shared accountability and ownership in community processes, which can help planning work feel more manageable and impactful.
- **Supports growth and flexibility.** Like cultures, planning processes must continue to evolve. The focus on continuous learning and engagement in cultural humility helps planners build skills that foster creativity and shared meaning-making, leading to more inclusive and innovative processes.

Cultural humility requires changes at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels to have meaningful impact. Planners should make a personal commitment to cultural humility and take action to influence organizational and societal change.

CULTURAL HUMILITY IN PERSONAL PRACTICE

Cultural humility is primarily about listening. Active listening, or listening with the sole purpose of understanding, helps deepen self-awareness and understanding of the communities planners serve, leading to better policies, practices, and programs. Core active listening techniques that can help planners build meaningful connections include:

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by Chloé Greene, founder of [Sowing Love](#).



Empathy, compassion, and active listening are key skills in practicing cultural humility. (Credit Getty Images E+/pixelfit).



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- **Giving your full attention.** Focus on what the person is saying. Being fully present shows community members that you value what they are sharing, appreciate their presence, and understand the importance of their contributions.
- **Avoiding judgment.** Listen without judgment. We all have experiences and biases that shape and inform our thinking. Work to understand how [biases](#) can affect how we respond to others, and use that to listen without imposing your thoughts and opinions on the situation.
- **Asking questions.** Being curious helps you understand what the person is sharing and encourages them to be open about their thoughts and feelings. Ask open-ended questions, such as, “Can you share more about that?” You will get deeper, more meaningful responses and begin building trust.

These techniques, practiced with empathy and compassion, strengthen planners’ abilities to listen and place community members—our greatest resource—at the center of community planning and policy development.

CULTURAL HUMILITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

For cultural humility to create change, individual commitments must lead to organizational commitments. Planners should consider how cultural humility can improve workplace culture and decision-making. Exploratory questions for discussion include the following:

- What opportunities exist for us to listen to the community and build connection? How can we provide more opportunities for dialogues that heal divides?
- What are our organizational values? Who defines what that looks and feels like? How can we ensure our organizational practices align with our values?
- What role does listening play in our organizational practice? Do we lead with empathy and compassion when working alongside the community?
- Where does our work fall on the [Spectrum of Public Participation](#)? How can we advance on the spectrum to impactful community-driven engagement?
- What shared learning do we engage in before we engage with communities? Is our learning rooted in exhibiting “mastery of skills” or genuine and compassionate curiosity?

By intentionally considering and discussing these questions with colleagues, planners can increase awareness and build a commitment to more inclusive and connective ways of practice.

CULTURAL HUMILITY IN SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

To contribute to broader societal change, planners must consider how their individual and organizational commitments are moving the systems they are part of toward equity and justice. This requires enabling community power-building and decision-making and advocating for community-led planning and policymaking. Planners must question any policies and institutional practices that exclude anyone from meaningfully contributing to society.

[Narrative change work](#), which uses inclusive storytelling to shift and expand mindsets, challenge stereotypes, and promote decision-making that leads to shared community well-being, can also support planners in widening their impact. These skills can help planners build the case for community-led planning that centers belonging for everyone.

CONCLUSIONS

When practiced authentically, cultural humility is a powerful tool. It helps planners grow individually and professionally and can lead to stronger community plans with greater community buy-in. Though cultural humility is a “deep skill” that requires intentionality, discipline, and consistency, it is a worthwhile commitment that will improve planners’ abilities to enhance the lives of others.

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FURTHER READING

Published by the American Planning Association

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McSorley, Meaghan. 2024. [“Empathy in Planning.”](#) PAS QuickNotes 109.

Other Resources

Chavez, Vivian. 2012. [Cultural Humility: People, Principles, and Practices](#). YouTube.

Martins, Julia. 2024. [“Effective Active Listening: Examples, Techniques, and Exercises.”](#) Asana Inspire & Impact Collection, June 21.

Racial Equity Tools. n.d. [Narrative Change](#).

University of Oregon. n.d. [Cultural Humility](#).