

## Culture, competency and risk: The mystery and crossroads continues

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The connection and gaps between “culture, competency and risk” are very real yet often misunderstood. As authors, we have been exploring this topic for several years. And, in continuing to write about this topic, we do this as learners, not experts. So once again we endeavor to go to places in our work, and through workshop development, that calls for both a paradigm readjustment and requires a certain degree of courage. We share our erudition and we seek not expertise, but expansion.

For the last five years we have attempted to expand definitions, create conscious dialogue about differences, and have sought to push the edges of traditionally held constructs of the way our profession assesses and analyzes the risk we expose to our participants.. Bringing to light the human dimensions of culture and risk management has been no easy task; and, it asks those who dare venture into this complex maze, to examine individual and organizational belief systems. These beliefs are as unique and diverse as the many types of people our organizations are comprised, and that of those we serve.

Our work and philosophy, both personally and professionally, integrates our understanding of the needs of wilderness professionals as learners and the fact that culturally appropriate training designs must both model and instruct staff in the skills required to implement effective outdoor and experiential education activities for culturally diverse constituents. Additionally, creating an organizational climate of being inclusive, welcoming, and a place flourishing with allies will contribute to recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce to assist with accomplishing agency goals.

### Connecting with culture

“Culture” is as multifaceted as it is mysterious; it is, consequently, beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this concept as deeply as we would like. Nonetheless, it is timely, and of the essence for the field, to keep acquiring new knowledge about the complexities of how risk management is impacted by culture. Additionally, it is crucial for staff and organizations (e.g., the system) to comprehend the connections in order to enhance the competency of staff. Indisputably, despite decades of interdisciplinary research, culture will always mean different things to different people. There is no definition that anyone would heartily accept. In its simplest form, culture is merely a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore and institutions that affect the behaviors of a relatively

large group of people (Lustig & Koester, 1999; Sasidharan, 2002).

One of the problems often encountered is misunderstanding between people of different cultures and the assumption that, in some way, world-views about either the programs/activities or settings in which they occur are basically the same. In particular, the wilderness is a realized dream, in America, that has helped give this country greatness. Not only do different groups have different world-views, they dream differently and hold different images of how things “ought to be” regarding the meaning and value of wilderness and opportunities for outdoor education and adventure that may occur in these spectacular lands of wonder and beauty. We must continue to extend our knowledge and understanding of attitudes and behaviors by exploring the complex dynamic of *culture*. That is, we must include consideration of contexts – such as, the particular historical and social settings, and the particular cultural features of groups to understand the environment in which collective action is organized and in which experience takes place (Roberts, 2003).

Connecting culture with competency and risk continues to be a delicate and complicated balance. Over the years, many theories and paradigms of cultural competency have been developed across a variety of disciplines. No connections, however, have been made until we (i.e., Gray & Roberts, 1997) began to explore the relationship to risk management and outdoor/experiential activities and wilderness environments. For organizations and professionals in this field to create the connection and understand the value of institutionalizing principles and best practices of cultural competency this will provide a greater sense of safety and enjoyment for everyone we serve.

### A culture of safety

As indicated, “culture” means different things to different people. How does it relate specifically to the notion of *safety* as our primary interest? Ken Kizer, M.D., MPH, President and CEO, National Quality Forum, defines a *culture of safety* as “an integrated pattern of individual and organizational behavior, and its underlying philosophy and values, that continuously seeks to minimize hazards and patient harm that may result from the processes of care” (Kizer, 2002). While this quote is taken from the medical profession, it clearly speaks to wilderness risk management as well as we have people who are in our care and who count on us to provide a safe environment in which to learn and grow.

As we continue to examine risk management practices relating to the social, cultural, physical, ethnic, racial and spiritual aspects of our participants and programs, we ask questions that sometimes do not have answers and give suggestions for concrete ways to think in multiplicity about risk management practices. We have case studies that elucidate ways in which traditional risk management systems have failed, and we have success stories that give hope to expanded practices, principles, and approaches to a more inclusive view of culture, competency and risk.

A risk management approach that is inclusive, embraces a pervasive spirit of teamwork and collaboration. For example, each staff feels she or he is an equal partner in improving Humanistic Risk Management<sup>®</sup> (HRM) and feels a responsibility to identify and/or act to prevent potential harm in the physical emotional and technical aspects of any given program/course. This HRM model was developed several years ago when we, as authors, began our pursuit on this topic (see Appendix 1 to view the expanded model).

### Challenging competency

If a manager/director is looking to broaden the scope of risk management and embrace the importance of a complete HRM—incorporating cultural variables—recruitment and training practices such as the following key components must be considered:

- ✓ Incorporate accountability for humanistic risk management and cultural competency into job descriptions and, subsequently, also into performance measures.
- ✓ Discuss importance of HRM, and expectations for reporting concerns and/or incidents, with all employees, beginning with their interview and orientation process.
- ✓ Evaluate employees on contributions they make in HRM.
- ✓ Determine barriers and constraints that exist among individuals in the organization and/or systemic issues that are more difficult to “pin point”. Be committed to mitigate any constraints that are present and learn to manage with intent of preventing future barriers from surfacing.
- ✓ Reward employees for disclosing incidents and/or concerns.
- ✓ Implement team training, simulations, and case studies. And, make sure each person knows their responsibility and is looking out for other members of the staff team and the participants they serve.
- ✓ Encourage a mindset and policy, if applicable, of: “If it looks wrong, it is wrong”. Anyone who therefore sees an incident related to HRM is inspired to speak up.

For wilderness educators to be effective, acknowledging and incorporating the culture of the participants (current or prospective) as well as utilize the cultural strengths inherent within the organization within which they work is absolutely essential. A person’s cultural affiliation often determines their values and attitudes about the outdoors, how they receive responses to messages from leaders, and even how they perceive the notion of “safety” in unfamiliar environments. Organizations must design and manage culturally competent programs to address the wide assortment of people they serve with the reality groups will become more diverse with the passage of time. To accomplish this, educational and interpersonal skills must be developed allowing staff to increase their understanding, appreciation of, and ability to respond appropriately to cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups (see Appendix 2).

As noted by Bill Gwaltney (2003) of the National Park Service, “in order to effect change, we must recognize that agency culture presents real barriers to diversity and we must all work to change agency culture to remove those barriers.” In the field of outdoor and experiential education this change of culture is imperative, now more than ever, and we need to establish “real world” benchmarks so we can measure our success or failure and adjust our actions accordingly. As recognized by Gwaltney, no matter what the organization, leaders and decision-makers must also recognize how deep-seated attitudes can truly be. In the end, we must hire, train, mentor and promote people who value diversity and embrace the fine distinctions of different cultural groups.

There are workable solutions for any difficult issues that may surface. It will be necessary to demonstrate how serious a manager or director is about making the risk management changes desired in their agency. An organizational strategy for making programs relevant to diverse cultural groups and fully understand the connection to risk, should be based on key concepts and action steps based on individual as well as organizational commitment to change.

### Conclusion

As practitioners and scholars, we continue to develop our HRM Model<sup>®</sup>. We do this with the knowledge that we are asking organizations and individuals to think even more deeply about risk management than might already occur. We believe it is essential that our field move beyond the traditional “same ole, same ole” and that we embrace the change and challenge that HRM brings to the table.

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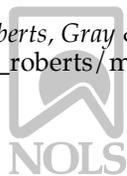
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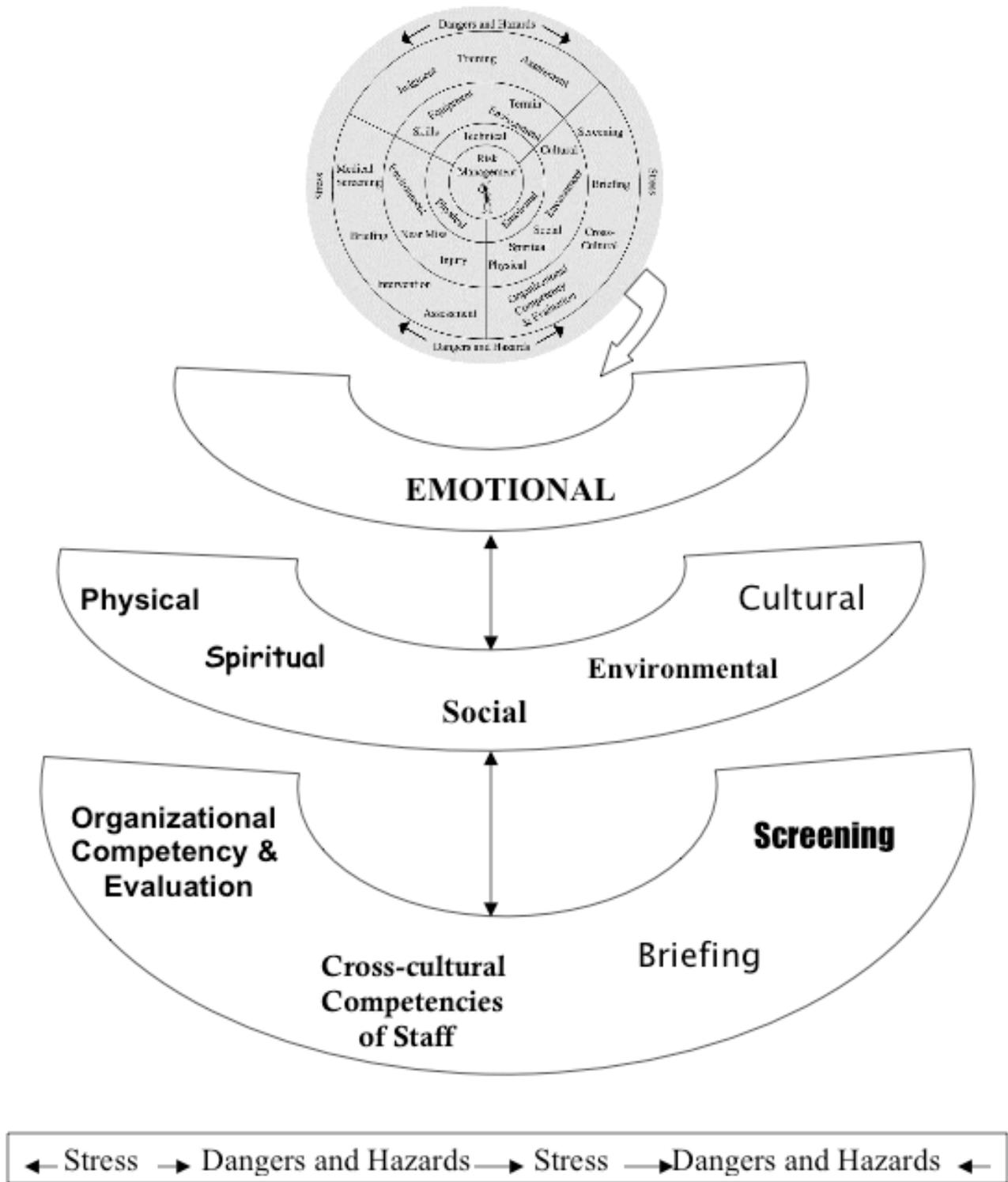
Note: Sky and Nina co-own *Roberts, Gray & Associates*, consulting and diversity training. For more information: [http://home.earthlink.net/~ns\\_roberts/mainpage/id16.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~ns_roberts/mainpage/id16.html)



**Appendix 1**

**Humanistic Risk Management Model<sup>®</sup> (expanded version, 2002)**  
 (Gray & Roberts, 1998)

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**Culturally competent programs...**

- Acknowledge culture as a predominant force in shaping behaviors, values and organizations or agencies;
- Acknowledge and accept that cultural differences exist and have an impact on program quality and risk management issues;
- Believe that diversity within cultures is as important as diversity between cultures;
- Respect the unique, culturally defined needs of various client populations;
- Recognize that concepts such as “family” and “community” are different for various cultures and even for subgroups within cultures;
- Understand that people from different racial and ethnic groups are usually best served by staff who are a part of, or in tune with their culture; and
- Recognize that incorporating the strengths of all cultures enhances the capacity of everyone involved.
- Understand the relationship of how culture and risk are not mutually exclusive and therefore builds in potential modules to training and leadership development (e.g., case studies).