



Stepping onto Latina Ground

Today's nonprofit sector is justifiably concerned with serving diverse communities. Both service organizations and funders recognize that work in communities of color is critical, but the path to effectiveness is not the same as the one followed in many mainstream organizations. We have learned at Casa de Esperanza—a Latina domestic violence organization—that a subtle racism exists in the approaches used in many organizations; we have also learned that it is not enough for us to be “a Latina organization”—our strategies must be different, as well.

Each type of nonprofit organization has its strength as it works with diverse communities. Mainstream organizations often are blessed with stability and infrastructure, while organizations based in communities of color possess cultural understanding and connections. Mainstream organizations have invested great resources to “get at” the issue of diversity, and individuals of color are now on their boards of directors and staffs. However, they lack the understanding and connection with communities of color that are so vital to effective work.

Yet the Council on Foundations reports that mainstream organizations continue to receive the majority of funding earmarked to serve diverse communities. Grantmakers want to ensure that their dollars are put to good use; they are much more confident investing in organizations with a sturdy infrastructure than in community-based organizations of color. (At Casa de Esperanza, we find that those funded mainstream organizations often turn to us for [free!] help and guidance because they don't have the cultural capacity to serve cultural communities fully.)

Unfortunately, communities of color often buy into similarly skewed thinking. They come to learn that the more professional their organization appears the more funders will trust them to produce results.

Several years ago, Casa de Esperanza put a stop to this type of organizational philosophy. We realized that our service model followed mainstream assumptions—we had merely added linguistic differences and cultural flair to our work. In conversations with many Latinas from our communities, we heard them say, “We don't want to leave our families and stay in a shelter. We just want the violence to stop!” They were telling us that our mainstream domestic violence model wasn't working. It wasn't good enough!

So we listened to our communities and stepped onto Latina ground. It took courage, introspection, and truly allowing Latinas to lead us. Latinas are—and always will be—at our table. We recognized the centrality of the community and family to Latino life and that domestic violence will be decreased only with the involvement of the community. Our focus, direction, and mission changed.

Casa de Esperanza also utilizes what works in the mainstream model. We've worked hard at infrastructure and effectiveness as an agency—an agency whose heart and soul is Latina.

Creating change wasn't easy, but it was worth the risk. Today we are seeing results with women in the community and at our shelter; our educational tools are being distributed nationally; and Casa de Esperanza is positioned for the future. We have made these strides because we believe that what Latinas have to offer is valuable and essential.

Nonprofit organizations and foundations must value and invest equitably in organizations of color and mainstream organizations. We all have gifts and talents to bring to the table, but we must start *valuing* those gifts in order to truly serve our communities. Until we do, we will not stop operating with a deficit (or need-based) mentality, and we will continue the tokenistic role forced upon people and organizations of color. In essence, we will continue to use the vehicles of racism.