

Workplace Diversity: Standing Together

Whether you are employed at an office, farm, restaurant, manufacturing facility or store, odds are you are surrounded by people from different cultures and backgrounds. Being employed in such a diverse and inclusive workforce requires sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds, native languages and social practices of those around you. This is particularly true at times of heightened racial or ethnic tensions.

We all know the importance of embracing the differences between individuals by recognizing everyone's unique contribution to the organization. Employees who work well together and treat each other equally and with respect are the foundation for any successful enterprise. But during times of civil unrest, it is important that we be extra sensitive to outside tensions to ensure that they do not spill over into the workplace. Often, that means taking the extra step to head off misunderstandings before they happen, as well as being understanding and patient with others who may make a mistake that offends you in some way.

The following suggestions can help anyone, whether managers or employees, ensure that their workplace is an inclusive, productive and accepting environment for everyone, even during difficult times.

Identifying Our Hidden Biases

Diversity is a word that refers to differences in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, physical health and other differences in backgrounds or lifestyles. The challenge at work and in our daily lives is to see others as individuals and to not judge them based on appearances or other aspects of their lives. Recognizing and accepting our differences can lead to more understanding and a better, more productive environment for everyone.

Discrimination based on appearance or other factors can be both blatant and subtle. A hidden form of bias occurs when people unintentionally stereotype. The best way to combat this is to be more aware of how we communicate, act and react toward others.

Be aware of and avoid words, images and situations that suggest people of one type of group are all the same or even hold the same opinions. These kinds of words and gestures cause harm, even if they are unintended.

Use race, ethnic origin or other identity only when relevant. In most cases, it is not necessary.

Avoid clichés, qualifiers and connotations that reinforce stereotypes. They are often interpreted as ignorant, superior or offensive.

Realize that patronizing remarks and tokenism aimed at specific groups can be offensive not only to those about whom the remarks are being made, but to others as well.

The ASK Model for Valuing Diversity

With so many personalities, cultures and backgrounds, there is great potential for miscommunication and false impressions to disrupt workflow and create bad feelings among co-workers. Of course everyone has the right to express his or her opinion and needs to respect the opinions of others, even if disagreed with. But work is not the place for controversial or potentially inflammatory comments. When in doubt about whether what you have to say may be insensitive to others, keep the ASK model of valuing diversity in mind:

A is for awareness of self and others. Be aware of how your words and behaviors affect others, as well as how their words and behaviors affect you. Also be aware of your own assumptions and prejudices.



S is for sensitivity and skills. Being sensitive and empathetic toward and willing to understand other people's needs, views and feelings is the key to developing effective, multicultural communication skills. Develop ways to communicate that reflect an understanding of and response to other people's views, as opposed to telling them your view and how they should behave as a result.

K is for knowledge. Seek to learn about cultures, experiences and values different from your own. Offer to share knowledge of your experience with others. The more knowledge we have of each other, the more we can truly embrace and value the diversity around us.

The New Golden Rule

Another step you can take is to use the New Golden Rule: Treat others the way they would like to be treated. If you're confused about what that means, ask them. Your question will help avoid misunderstandings and can open a valuable exchange of information. Some other tips to keep in mind:

- **Understand and respect individual differences.** Remember that not everyone sees things the same way you do and keep an open mind toward others.
- **Be assertive.** Let other people know how you want to be treated, and don't be afraid to speak up if something makes you uncomfortable. How will people know that you find a particular expression or behavior offensive unless you tell them?
- **Be thankful** if someone has the courage and sensitivity to tell you how you've offended them. Don't get defensive; the only way you can correct the situation is through honest communication.

What Else You Can Do

Ellen Bettman's *Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communication* offers some ideas on positive ways to experience diversity:

- Make a list of things unique to your culture and ask a co-worker of a different nationality to do the same. By sharing the lists you will discover interesting differences and, likely, some similarities.
- Experience a new viewpoint, by tasting food from a different culture, volunteering for an organization whose members are different from you or attending a religious service of a different faith or culture.
- If your co-workers tell bigoted jokes or use racist/sexist/homophobic language, ask them to stop. At the very least, they should alter their behavior in your presence.
- If approached with care, most people welcome questions about their heritage and culture. It is a way for them to inform you of their preferences and experiences, and a way for you to learn more about human differences.

