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*Say What You Mean the Right Way:
Healthy Forms of Communication*

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How to Communicate With Cross-Cultural Colleagues

Remember that people from different countries, even other English-speaking nations, probably won't speak, dress, act, or even eat the same way you do. Don't assume that someone from another country, or another culture, shares your values and attitudes, no matter how firmly you believe in them, or how widely held you think they are. Expect and respect cultural differences.

Almost all of the mistakes that happen in a cross-cultural conversation happen because someone makes an assumption based on incorrect information about the other person's culture. That incorrect information can come from a number of sources: rumors, friends, jokes, even biased newscasts. If you want to know if something you heard is correct, try to ask around it.

For example, say you're talking to someone from Africa and you've heard that his native culture doesn't celebrate Christmas. You'd want to ask around the question, "You really don't celebrate Christmas?" rather than asking this directly and risking insulting the person. You can do this by starting with a question like "What holidays do you celebrate back home?"

By asking your conversation partner about his own beliefs or habits or culture, you show interest in him as a person (which is a good tactic in any conversation). As you chat, listen for topics to expand upon, and take note of ones you should avoid.

Speaking of topics to avoid, don't be nationalistic. You might feel that the United States is the best country in the world, but most Canadians feel that Canada is the best country in the world, and there are plenty of Kenyans who say that Kenya's the best. Avoid statements like "America has the best food (or economy, military, political system, music, movies, etc.)." You may feel you're stating facts, but they're really just opinions that could easily spark an argument—or resentful silence.

Let's look at a cross-cultural interaction gone wrong:

Jeff is introduced to one of his company's new consultants, Lora. As Lora smiles and says hello, Jeff notices her dark skin and Spanish accent.

As they make small talk, Jeff realizes that Lora's still calling him Mr. Williams. He decides to help break the ice and call Lora by her first name as often as he can. In an attempt to warm her up, he asks if she's been to any good bullfights lately. When she balks, he mentions an article describing the cruelty of bullfighting, and then he invites her to a basketball game so that she can see some real American sports.

How did Jeff do? Well, he violated most of our rules:

1. He didn't take time to find out that Lora was brought up in a very formal atmosphere. He also assumed that he could address her by her first name without asking if it was okay to do so.
2. He tried to force her into a degree of familiarity that made her uncomfortable.
3. By asking her about bullfighting, he assumed she was from Spain or Mexico. Lora's from Chile, which doesn't allow bullfighting.
4. He made himself look a little foolish when he talked to her as if she didn't know that some people regard bullfighting as cruel, because Lora's a vegetarian and a member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

5. When he invited her to the basketball game, he showed a bit of a nationalist streak by assuming that basketball, an “American” sport, was better than bullfighting—and by assuming that Lora had never been to a basketball game before.

What can Jeff do differently next time?

- **Ask around the question.** Instead of assuming where she’s from, or even asking “Where are you from?” (since she could answer “Brooklyn”), he should allow the conversation to develop and give her an opportunity to feel comfortable discussing her ethnicity and nationality.
- **Respect cultural differences.** He should have also asked how she preferred to be addressed.
- **Don’t be a nationalist.** Jeff tried to show Lora “the American way” by inviting her to a basketball game. But basketball scores big in a number of world courts these days—and there are other sports that Lora might have valued every bit as highly as Jeff did basketball.

FAQs

One of my coworkers is an immigrant, and I think she feels self-conscious. I feel badly for her because she hardly talks to anyone. How can I draw her into a conversation?

Try open-ended questions; questions that seek information and encourage her to talk a lot. Asking her about the town she’s from or what she did for fun as a kid is a great way to encourage her to open up. She’s probably just as eager to talk about mutual interests and experiences as you are. Some other good topics are sports, pets, business, travel, careers, entertainment, fashion, food and drink, hobbies, and outdoor activities.

I’m starting up a friendship with our neighbors, who just moved here from India, but I’m worried that I’m going to bring up a sensitive topic. How do I know what topics to avoid?

There’s a rule of conversation that applies to everyone no matter what country they’re from: Avoid anything related to sex, politics, or religion. These topics are highly charged and can lead to uncomfortable discussions and unintended insults. Luckily, it’s pretty easy to steer a conversation away from these sensitive subjects. Remember also that as relationships develop, there’s room for mistakes and the ability to correct them through honest communication.

One of my coworkers is still learning English. I don’t want to embarrass him by constantly asking him to repeat himself. What’s a tactful way to say that I don’t understand him?

Be patient and encourage your coworker to take his time when he speaks. Try paraphrasing what you think he said or what he’s trying to say. It’s easier to understand English than to speak it, so rephrasing offers nonnative speakers the opportunity to confirm or correct their meaning.

Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2017). How to communicate with cross-cultural colleagues. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Celebrating Diversity at Work: Cultural Variety

Diversity has replaced the melting pot as the American ideal. Cultures, races, and religions are no longer expected to meld into one. But all this individuality can create conflict when those different people get together. And one place they meet is at work. You probably have a microcosm of society right in your workplace. Is that a problem?

Well, it can be, unless you create a work culture that accepts, respects, and understands differences. People are proud of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds and don't want to stifle these feelings for 8 hours each day. Managers face the challenge of building a harmonious and productive work environment.

Today's workforce features a remarkable range of diversity. People work together despite their differences in

- Religious beliefs
- Ethnicity
- Varying degrees of physical ability
- Sexual orientation
- Economic and educational background
- Cultural preferences (expressed through such things as dress, hairstyles, and jewelry)
- Diet (from religious restrictions to dietary choices)

Mix those together and you have one tall order. But if managed well, the company will have accomplished more than political correctness. A diverse staff can better serve customers and clients who also come from diverse backgrounds.

Diversity can lead to profits, too: Previous research has shown a link between superior corporate performance and senior management teams that included different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and ages.

Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2018). Celebrating diversity at work: Cultural variety. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. I am frustrated and angry with my employee for coming to work late. Sometimes, I lose my cool. However, I am not letting the employee get away with it. I encourage coworkers to confront the behavior. A fellow manager said I am an enabler. How so?

A. Enabling exists because you are failing to implement a strategic approach to resolving this problem, and the emotional and personal involvement prevents its implementation. When an employee exhibits unacceptable performance like poor work quality, tardiness, or conduct problems on the job, it is appropriate to confront it. Hopefully, things improve. The correct approach relieves you from the emotional involvement you have experienced. The EAP model allows you to step away from all the emotionality. Instead, you make the assumption that some personal problem or concern outside the employee's control drives the behavior. A ladder of progressive steps ultimately motivates the employee to get help. Talk to the EAP about these progressive steps. You will most likely be successful in getting your employee to accept help because, when properly implemented, the EAP intervention steps demonstrate to the employee that the organization will not permit an ongoing problem with attendance.

Q. Can an EAP advise our management group on the possible psychological effects of a pending disciplinary action on an employee who is not a client of the EAP?

A. An EAP might discuss a manager's concern about a pending decision to use disciplinary action, to help him or her gain clarity, offer support in managing stress associated with the decision, or address personal fears. However, the EAP would not render a psychological judgment in general regarding risk of a disciplinary action. Doing so interferes with management processes and violates an ethical boundary of non-interference by EAPs. If the EAP engaged in this process, it could be viewed as authorizing, consenting to, approving, and sanctioning the decision. This would produce a schism within your management group if the EAP, as an expert, trumped others' opinions. Some managers might agree, while others not. Management would feel forced to accept whatever the EAP recommended. This bind would take a toll on the EAP's ability to attract employees and managers. A consult with HR, a third-party consultant, or other management advisors should be considered.

Q. I saw an online article that said bad bosses can make employees sick. What are they referring to, and exactly what boss issues affect employees most?

A. Studies show that 50% of employees have quit a job because of a bad boss. One study reported that 75% consider their boss a major source of stress, but most have no plans to quit. The health issue is stress. Here's a list of common complaints from a Harris Poll in order of severity: 1) not recognizing employee achievements; 2) not giving clear directions; 3) not having time to meet with employees; 4) refusing to talk with subordinates; 5) taking credit for others' ideas; 6) not offering constructive criticism; 7) not knowing an employee's name; 8) refusing to talk with people on the phone or in person; and 9) not asking about employees' lives outside of work. Nearly all of these fall in the realm of communication, and some you may find surprising. For example, employees want you to know more about them personally. Do any apply to you? Your EAP will help you become a champ on any of these issues. Source: Interactive/Harris poll of 1,000 workers.

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