



Multicultural Communication

Five ways to avoid being a cultural rube

BY TOMÁS GARZA

Fostering a cohesive and productive work culture can be a challenge. There are the interests of different departments to manage, time pressures, budget limitations and a host of different personalities. To top it off, people in today's workplace come from different backgrounds and nationalities and hold a variety of religious beliefs. As a result, people may have vastly dissimilar concepts of work, interpersonal communication and group harmony.

While multicultural communication skills are a must, it can be an intimidating concept for many. The good news? They're surprisingly easy to practice. The following five tips require very little effort, and in multicultural communication, it's the effort that counts.

1) Keep an Open Mind

This is the most important thing you can do in relating to individuals of different cultures. People simply don't do things the same way. We are bombarded with cultural assumptions every day, particularly in the media, and being an effective communicator means letting go of our own preconceived notions about people and the backgrounds they come from. Keeping an open mind means not stereotyping. It's a matter of self-awareness. It helps to ask ourselves: Am I holding on to any preconceived notions that are getting in my way?

2) Acquire Some Knowledge

To be fluid with colleagues and clients, it is important to have at least a general understanding of each person's cultural background. This will give you valuable

cues as to their definitions of respect, their personal boundaries and their overall sense of how interactions should be conducted. Arm yourself with some basics, especially if you know you will be working in or around other cultures. For example, in Japan it is considered rude to show someone the sole of your shoe. Many Jews and Muslims do not eat pork. Again, having this knowledge is a matter of awareness. The more cognizant you become, the more effective your organization will be.

3) Practice Active Listening

All human beings feel more valued, more secure and more a part of a team if they are confident they are being heard. Give people this value by actively listening to them, making eye contact (or not, depending on the culture), nodding and giving verbal indications you are listening. You may also find it helpful to summarize and restate what someone has told you, particularly if this restatement echoes a great idea or a concern. Practicing these points and simply keeping the issue in mind will boost team morale and improve your communication immeasurably.

4) Watch Your Nonverbal Cues

Often included with the skill of active listening, nonverbal communication takes on special importance when it comes to multiculturalism. For example, many Native Americans do not make eye contact the way people do in a typical business or corporate environment. In some cultures, animated gestures or talking with your hands is considered normal, while in others it is a sign of mental instability. For almost

everyone, it is considered impolite to speak to somebody while glued to a computer screen or cell phone. Paying attention to your nonverbal messages can show you're listening and that your colleagues' opinions matter.

5) Maintain a Personal Touch

Even when faced with deadlines and a burdensome workload, it is important to keep a personal touch in your interactions. In multicultural communication, it is a matter of simple awareness. For example, if you know that people of certain nationalities are family-oriented, it takes very little effort to ask someone about their kids. The other person then sees you as nicer and more human, building trust between you. Anything you can do to show an interest in your colleagues' lives outside of work will build camaraderie among you and make your organization that much more effective and enjoyable.

Attaining comfort and fluidity in multicultural communication is surprisingly easy. Practicing these five suggestions will make your work life more enjoyable, and you will avoid coming across as a cultural rube. Remember that perfection is not required, nor expected. It's making the effort that counts. ✪



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