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NEWSLETTER



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Issue 51

Cross Cultural Communication in the Workplace

As Canada becomes a multi-cultural society, it is increasingly important to be sensitive to cross cultural issues that may arise in the workplace.

When we encounter someone who acts outside of one of our cultural norms, we often assume the problem is one of ignorance. If the behaviour persists, we may suspect that person has a personal issue. Eventually, we entertain the possibility that the person is operating from a different set of rules. For example, in North America, we place a lot of importance on *time* and punctuality is revered. We rely heavily on day planners and electronic schedulers; the retirement watch is often the parting gift to symbolize the end of a successful career. Common expressions in our language include "spend time", "kill time", "waste time", "do time", "time is money", "one thing at a time", etc. Consider then the example of an employee new to Canada who routinely arrives late for work. Initially, we may assume that he or she is not aware of the expectation of starting on time. If the lateness persists, we may begin to suspect that a personal failing is responsible for the tardiness such as laziness, disregard for rules, or even an addiction. When the employee is finally confronted about the issue of being late, it only then becomes clear that for that person, their concern for supporting relationship is more important than their concern about "time".

Culture is communication, according to Edward T. Hall, a pioneer in the exploration of cultural impact. Through our verbal communication and non-verbal behaviours, we convey the norms of our culture. A firm handshake is an acceptable greeting in North America whereas a bow is customary in parts of Asia. In the West, direct eye contact is a generally accepted sign of trustworthiness and someone may be deemed "shifty" if they fail to make eye contact. For aboriginal Canadians however, and in some Middle Eastern countries, direct eye contact is regarded as disrespectful and improper.

Context is a useful frame work to think about cross cultural communication. Hall describes Western culture as *low context* in that we rely heavily on words to make our messages direct and explicit. In *high context* cultures, there is greater reliance on non-verbal cues and the context in which the communication is occurring. Western culture emphasizes rational thought processes and there are many cultures that rely more on intuition than logic. Our *low context* society focuses on individual fulfillment and our strongest ties are generally limited to immediate family. In *high context* cultures in other parts of the world, people fulfill roles as part of their societal group and decision-making is made as a group and community. Family affiliation includes extended family.

According to Statistics Canada, in 1981, visible minorities represented 4.7% of Canada's total population. By 2006, the number had grown to 16.2%. If the current immigration trend continues, visible minority groups could account for about one-fifth of the total population by 2017. The vast majority (95.9%) of visible minorities reside in metropolitan areas. More than half (54.2%) of Canada's visible minority population resides in Ontario.

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Cross Cultural Communication in the Workplace (continued)

In work settings, it may be helpful to consider whether employees or business associates are affiliated with low context or high context culture. For instance, by Canadian standards, job applicants are expected to promote themselves explicitly and by detailing their skills. An applicant from China or Japan may be uncomfortable with this process as accomplishments are most often attributed to group efforts. The interview may be *culturally biased* if it does not take into account the person's skill set in relation to their country of origin experience. Similarly, a Canadian may get frustrated when doing business with someone from the Far East who insists on consulting with colleagues before making a decision. The delay may be misconstrued as a pressure tactic rather than reflecting a cultural custom.

When considering the role of culture in an individual's frame of reference, it is equally important to remember that values and communication style are influenced by a number of

other critical factors: family constellation, life experience, education, world events, and pop culture during formative years. It is important to be curious and ask what is important to the person, how would they know they had done a good job, how does learning and communication work best for them.

To reduce the possibility of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- Do not make assumptions
- Invite discussion
- Listen attentively
- Treat people with respect
- Show empathy
- Seek understanding and common interests

Although there are obvious challenges associated with cross-cultural communication at work, diversity brings with it opportunities for innovation and the possibility of expanded opportunities.

Some of the following tips may be useful when communicating with someone from a different culture. Be especially vigilant when communicating by telephone, paper, or e-mail where the person does not see you and cannot ask for immediate clarification.

- Use short, clear simple sentences.
- Speak at a normal speed.
- Confirm comprehension by asking "What do you understand?" rather than "Do you understand?" The person may answer yes to be polite. Paraphrasing can lead to similar misunderstandings.
- Do not raise your voice or they can hear you.
- Avoid "sports" English.
- Define the meaning of important technical words at the beginning.
- Avoid creating new words such as "Doable, Google, etc."
- Avoid humour.
- Avoid double negatives and "Isn't it?" questions.
- Beware of differences in the various forms of English (British, American, Australian, etc.).
- Be patient and do not interrupt.
- Talk about the process of communication and examine barriers. Ask "What is going on here?" and check assumptions.
- Respect differences; do not judge others based on style of speaking or accent.
- If you are angry, try to calm down before listening.
- Empathize with what the other person may be thinking or feeling.
- Listen to understand rather than reply. Try to help the speaker feel at ease.

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