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# Make diversity work

*How to bridge differences*

## Question:

**"I wonder if you could write about workforce diversity. How can people from different backgrounds work well together?"**



## Answer:

Throughout our history, our nation has experienced periodic shifting of the workforce. In the past decade, this has been substantially more dramatic.

Non-Hispanic whites are now – for the first time – the minority population in the 100 largest U.S. cities. Nearly half of the nation's new workers are made up of those traditionally considered minorities. Women will represent half of the U.S. workforce in the very near future. Organizations that have invested in diversity initiatives targeting women will benefit in the not too distant future for having done so.

But there is more here than meets the eye. Workforce demographics, the census, our common sense, and personal experiences are all communicating a new agenda for the American workplace. Diversity is no longer about gender and race. It's also about age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, religion, and much more.

Here's perhaps the most significant concern for us beyond the traits of our diverse workforce – the impact of communication styles, problem-solving abilities, and other unique contributions each individual will bring to the workplace. Clearly, we have differing gifts and abilities. How we use and learn to appreciate differing gifts and abilities in relation to our work provides a huge opportunity for not only bridging our differences but for addressing our business concerns such as employee involvement, customer service, and effectively communicating information.

A key question each of us needs to ask is, "What can I do to bridge differences

and improve organizational citizenship at my organization?"

The key to utilizing diversity during communication is to work hard to achieve all the "A's."

### We must be ...

- » Aware that we are all different.
- » Active in sharing and learning about differences.
- » Accepting of differences as beneficial.

**"If we try to change everything at once, we are likely to feel as if we have failed. If we try to change one thing at a time, we are likely to feel more successful."**

- » Appreciative of the skills and behaviors that can bridge differences.

Appreciation for the skills and behaviors that can bridge differences is one of the A's to achieve before you can maximize the benefits of diversity your organization. People capitalize on diversity only when they are able to communicate across their differences.

### The most effective methods for doing this include ...

- » Openness.
- » Willingness to share and learn.
- » Respect.
- » Trust.

- » Focus on similarities or commonalities, like a project goal.

These methods will help people build a common ground for communication—a bridge across their differences.

We've all experienced or witnessed sensitive situations related to diversity. We may have inadvertently offended someone. We may have seen a person discriminated against. Sensitive situations are

those that affect us deeply.

Handling these situations effectively is not easy. It takes courage. The strategies provided here may help you the next time you are faced with a sensitive diversity-related situation.

### ■ Find an ally

You don't have to deal with a sensitive situation alone. Find someone who knows the person with whom you are experiencing difficulty. The ally may be able to provide insight and ideas. Someone you trust. The ally can help you practice what you'll say, provide moral support, and help you arrive at alternatives for dealing with the situation. Find

someone who is an authority. The ally may be a person in a human-resource capacity who can tell you what your legal options are, what the organization's policies and practices are, and who can give you advice, based upon his or her experience and expertise.

## ■ Stop and think

When you experience something that brings out a strong reaction, often the most effective thing to do is avoid doing or saying anything. Don't act in the moment. Count to 10, wait a day, a week, or longer. Do whatever you need to do to help you regain your perspective.

## ■ Choose your battles

If we allow every comment or action that offends us to affect us deeply, we will soon be exhausted. An effective strategy is to decide what is most important and to focus on tackling only those issues. If we try to change everything at once, we are likely to feel as if we have failed. If we try to change one thing at a time, we are likely to feel more successful.

How will you ensure that you continue to practice respect and tolerance for individual differences? The behavioral modeling that you demonstrate along these lines will pay off greatly over time. This is the kind of behavioral display that can be truly contagious.

Think back to a situation at school where the "cool kid" accepted the "outcast" and then suddenly the misperception about the outcast vanished and everyone included him or her.

The same is true for adults in the workplace. We're often like big kids who need reminders about our individual gifts, contributions, and value to the organization.

The message in this column is to make a commitment to being the "cool kid." Do what you can to build bridges across differences. Adopt an inclusive interpersonal stance and encourage others to do the same. ■

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