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Working in a Culturally Diverse World: Avoiding stereotypes or making assumptions

Working well with all kinds of people is a key to success, whatever your position is in the workplace. This article series explores this skill and how it has become increasingly important now that the workforce is more global and more ethnically and culturally diverse than ever.

➤ This is the second in a three-part series of articles on working in a culturally diverse world. Read the previous article, [“What is diversity and why does it matter?”](#)

Avoiding stereotypes or making assumptions

An essential part of working in a diverse world is seeing each person as an individual who makes a unique contribution in the workplace. This means avoiding stereotypes or making assumptions about how people will think or act based on the demographics or groups they belong to.

Examine your attitudes. If you have fixed ideas about a certain group, ask yourself if you want others to make similar assumptions about your group.

Do not offer, condone, or repeat inappropriate humour. In the workplace there is no place for humour that is based on ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other characteristic that creates a diverse workforce. Most organizations have a very strong commitment to keeping racism and sexism—including disparaging and offensive humour—out of the workplace. Participating in this kind of humour could put your job at risk.

Keep in mind that everyone is different. Even if someone identifies strongly with a group, that person is still a unique individual with their own characteristics and is not going to match every characteristic of the group.

Avoid generalizations and comparisons. People may take these as a criticism even if you didn't mean them that way. Thinking in terms of "you people" or "those people," is a signal to take note to avoid this mindset.

Get to know people as individuals. The better you know them as individuals, the less likely you'll be to apply stereotypes to them.

Don't judge a group by the behaviour of a few members. The actions of a few people may not be typical of a group, even if the behaviour is very different from the people in your group.

Communicating across cultures

Every culture has its own style of communicating verbally (through words) and non verbally (through gestures, facial expressions, or other body language). To communicate across cultures, you'll need to pay attention to both forms of communication.

Observe how others communicate. Notice the words, gestures, and tone of voice of others, and how often they make eye contact. This may tell you what kind of communication feels most natural or comfortable to them.

Use multiple forms of communication. People who speak English as a second language may find it easier to understand written words than spoken ones. Send a quick email message or handwritten note to follow up on important conversations. Remember to give non-native speakers more time to read and comprehend slides of a presentation.

Avoid or explain vernacular expressions. Sayings such as "shake a leg" or "I'll take a rain check" may be familiar to you, but it may not be familiar to non-native English speakers or those not from Canada.

Avoid making assumptions about other cultures. For example, don't speak much more slowly, more loudly, or repeat yourself more often than you would with your own group, unless someone has specifically asked you to do this. Though you're trying to be helpful, your actions may come across as patronizing or condescending. Ask questions to find out if you need to adjust your regular communication style if you are speaking with a group of non-native speakers who you do not know well.

Apologize if you make a mistake or offend someone, even if it was unintentional. When you work with diverse groups of people, you may not know how everyone feels about certain words or actions. You need to observe their nonverbal reactions to your comments more closely for signs of uncertainty or offence. If you find out you have offended someone unintentionally, apologize right away and, of course, don't repeat the hurtful behaviour. And if you find yourself being offended by something someone says or does, give that person the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming the words or actions were intended to be offensive or disrespectful.

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