

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Diversity 101: Dealing with cultural differences in the workplace

Your office has hired a new employee who recently immigrated to The US from Singapore. Although she seems nice, you notice she never directly looks at you when speaking and avoids eye contact with others in the office. At first, you find this unsettling and wonder if she has something to hide or is even ignoring you. After mentioning it to a friend who has traveled to Singapore, however, you learn that direct eye contact can be considered aggressive or rude in that culture.

This is one example of misunderstandings that can take place at work due to basic cultural differences. Since workplaces are more culturally diverse than ever before, relating to coworkers can be a bit more challenging, and the approach you take may call for some extra effort.

So, what can y*ou* do to make the most of your culturally diverse workplace?

Below are some cultural cues that can help everyone avoid misunderstandings and work more harmoniously on the job.

Become an international "student." Taking the time to learn about co-workers' cultures can benefit everyone. When done in a respectful manner, showing interest in another person's culture can break down barriers and help you understand behaviors that are new or unusual to you. Knowing that face-to-face communication is preferred to emails for people of some cultures, for example, can help you better understand and relate to co-workers with these preferences.

Find a common connection. There are subjects that can be considered taboo when talking with colleagues, especially when you are just getting to know them. To be respectful of someone's personal beliefs, avoid talking about religion, politics or salaries when you are getting to know them. Stick to universal subjects like food, family or sports.

Imagine Your Roles Were Reversed

Take the time to put yourself in your coworkers' shoes, especially if language barriers or differing viewpoints become frustrating. Consider what the experience might be like for the other person.

If English is your first language, dealing with someone who has adopted English as a second language may sometimes seem time-consuming or challenging. But imagine yourself not only trying to communicate, but to work and succeed in a country where your mother tongue isn't widely spoken.

Be aware of making cultural references, using slang or telling jokes that not everyone will understand, and take the time to make sure you and coworkers are on the same page.

Make yourself available if a colleague needs further clarification, as some people may be too shy to ask questions. Becoming aware of the obstacles new immigrants face in the workplace is a good way to practice the golden rule: "Treat others the way that you would like to be treated."

Leading to a New Understanding

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As a manager or people leader, you can also ensure your employees embrace cultural diversity by setting an example. Build an inclusive workplace by:

- **Acknowledging cultural differences.** Recognize cultural holidays and practices, and try to develop an understanding of religious observances.
- **Forgetting "all work, no play."** Have potluck lunches once a month or host team-building seminars to unite your staff. These events allow people who wouldn't normally spend time together to get to know everyone and appreciate them on a personal level.
- **Creating a diversity committee.** Designate a group to specifically deal with personal culture, communication and inclusion issues in the workplace, and also act as a resource for new employees who are recent immigrants.

With the spread of globalization and an overall increase in immigration, the workplace is more culturally rich than ever before. While this may sometimes present challenges, understanding and respecting diversity can help you, your colleagues and your workplace to thrive.