

Topic: Diverse Workplace Communication

Today's workplace is more diverse than ever before. This diversity includes ethnic identity, religion, age, ability, gender identity and more. Bringing an extensive range of backgrounds, perspectives, and approaches together creates profoundly textured office environments that offer different ways to look at the same situation or address the same problem. While cross-pollinating thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and approaches in this way is necessary for a vibrant modern business organization, there are obstacles and hurdles to be overcome to develop and maintain such diversity; many of those obstacles reside in communication.

We often develop a shorthand with people who share our religion, ethnic background, come from the same country, state, city or neighborhood or are in the same age-groups, gender identification or are similarly abled. Through this shorthand, our commonalities can make communications flow more easily with those who share the most in common with us. Working with a diverse group can call for substantially more attention to our communications skills.

In our daily interactions, we use many different channels to communicate; these channels can include formal meetings, informal discussions, formal presentations or reports, whiteboards, office memos, texts, emails, phone calls, Skype meetings, and more. No matter which channel we choose for any particular engagement, our communication is so much more than merely our words or images. In verbal interactions, we not only communicate with our words, but our intonation and inflection, eye contact, body language, and the history of other things we have said. You need to know not only what you are saying, but also what is being perceived by the people you are addressing. In all of the channels, the most successful communication is that which considers all aspects of the interface and is concise and complete without being too flowery.

While professional communications coaches and facilitators are regularly brought in to help with these issues, organizations would prefer to place people with strong skills in this area in leadership positions. While communication in the diverse workplace can offer challenges, the rewards are vast.

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Subtopic: Diverse Workforce Opportunities

What opportunities does a diverse workforce offer? In today's globalized marketplace companies strive for diversity in the workplace. While we sometimes feel most at ease with those who share a common background, a diverse environment helps us to think outside of our boxes in a way that both broadens and deepens our work and the workplace. Bringing people from different cultures, generations, and perspectives offers concrete benefits to the organization, its teams, the work that they output, and the individuals involved. Among the benefits the team derives from the diverse workforce are:

- Increased Perspectives – A diverse group will approach any challenge from the perspective of their varied backgrounds, leading to a broader view and a deeper understanding of the goal, and of difficulties met along the way.
- Increased Range of Talents, Skills, and Expertizes – A more diverse group is less likely to duplicate talents, skills, and expertizes and more likely to offer a greater array of these.
- Increased Productivity – According to a report from the Bureau of National Affairs, Diversity not only fosters increased productivity, but it also provides fertile ground for the growth of healthy competitiveness, team and company loyalty, and overall good morale, all of which lead to employee job satisfaction and increased productivity.
- Increased Innovation and Creativity – Along with a broader scope of understanding, a more comprehensive skill set and increased productivity comes a greater ability to innovate and think creatively, leading to innovations.
- Enhanced Communications Skills – Language and cultural differences that might otherwise provide a communications obstacle to a company looking to expand into a new market can find themselves conversant with a much broader population. These enhanced communication skills might mean knowing an entirely different language, or it might mean being conversant in the culture, customs, behaviors, and idiomatic vocabulary of different populations within the language group.
- Enhanced Employee Performance – Workplace environments that are diverse inherently emphasize inclusivity. Working in an inclusive environment can reflect in higher team happiness, and morale translates directly to higher performance.
- Positive Reputation – Not only are employees attracted to diverse organizations but so are potential clients and customers. Many industries highly regard and seek out organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusivity.

Subtopic: Diverse Workforce Challenges

Developing and then successfully integrating a diverse workforce holds unique communication challenges. Lines of diversity can be drawn to include ethnicity, race, gender identity, religion, age, ability/disability or other differences that divide us into smaller groups. No matter where these lines fall, each group has its own unique culture built on an intricate matrix of their shared values, traits, morals, and customs.

While people who speak different languages, dialects, idioms, or slangs can create specific needs in communicating clearly, spoken or written language is only one challenge. Cultural differences are as significant as the language in effective communications. How your messages are received is deeply affected by the culture of the receiver. Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed the idea that some cultures are low-context communicators while others are high-context communicators. Low-context communicators, such as the Swiss or Germans, tend to be more logical, analytical, and oriented to action. Low-context communicators tend to require substantially less contextual clues to understand their meaning. By contrast, high-context communicators, like many Middle Eastern and Asian countries, operate in a more intuitive and contemplative manner; their communications require much more information to decipher. For instance, a question arising in a meeting in a Japanese corporation may receive an answer of “yes,” but that “yes” may mean yes or no depending on the context, tone, facial expression, and body language. Words are crucial to people who are low context communicators, while they hold much less importance to high context communicators.

Knowledge of these different backgrounds will prove invaluable in communicating in a diverse environment. In the diverse workforce, understanding each others' experiences, beliefs, values, and customs will result in the most successful and clear communication. Overcoming these kinds of challenges takes both awareness and willingness. The broader the range of people in an organization or team, the higher the potential difficulties. However, bearing these potential problems in mind can help you either avoid or overcome them.

- Encouraging Equal Participation – Colleagues and team members from some cultures may be more reticent to open up and voice their thoughts and opinions while others will be happy to do most of the talking. Both of these call for an organizational structure that encourages equal participation.
- Prejudice, Biases, and Negative Cultural Stereotypes – Members of diverse communities can face the preconceptions, biases, or negative cultural stereotypes from employees who are ignorant of their culture or those who fear for the security of their positions. Education will help eradicate cultural ignorance. Encouragement and praise to both individuals and teams will help to ease people's fears of their job security.
- Bridging Language Issues – Some diverse environments requires the ability to speak and comprehend languages other than your own. Remember that speaking a second or third language will not only allow you to communicate successfully with your colleagues and teams, but it will also allow you to interact with that many more potential customers or clients successfully.
- Archaic Words or Phrases – Over the years all languages have been imprinted with cultural biases and perspectives many of which do not appropriately address the diverse world of the 21st century. For example, the suffix “man” or “men” used to refer to all people (as in “businessman” or “postman”). This linguistic artifact is left over from a patriarchal time when genders were defined quite differently than they are today. An understanding that “businessperson” is more appropriate than “businessman,” or that “flight attendant” is more appropriate today than “stewardess” is one example of embracing gender-neutral language. Our language contains many words and expressions that are potentially dismissive, offensive, or even confrontational to various diverse members of your workforce. Making individuals and teams aware of these potential micro-aggressions can help to prevent them. Knowledge is power.
- Reforming Cultural Ignorance – As our workplaces grow more diverse, people who have never encountered different groups may be ignorant about the culture and values of their new workmates. The first important step in trying to eradicate cultural ignorance starts with a clear plan to educate. This plan might be as casual as an after-hours happy hour with the drinks and cuisines of a different culture, or in-house lunch meetings celebrating cultural or regional holidays or foods. The more that people from diverse backgrounds talk to and share with each other, the more understanding is promoted, eradicating ignorance.
- Conflicting Working Styles – Different work styles, when not adequately addressed, can cause unwanted conflict. There are four essential work styles: 1) logical, analytics, date-oriented, 2) Organized, sequential, data-oriented, 3) Supportive and emotionally-oriented, and 4) Larger vision, integrative, ideation-oriented. It is the team leader or manager's job to integrate these work styles, making the team aware of how they fit together. This way each understands the role that the other is playing. Teams or organizations not made up of all four types (in the appropriate proportions) risk poor communication and poor performance.

Subtopic: Workplace Diversity

Imagine a baseball team with an incredible roster of players, but the team is entirely made up of left-fielders. They may all be exceptional players, but they need the correct mix of people to go all the way to the World Series. The best way to ensure the right range of players in the business world is to create workforce diversity.

In any workplace, communications need to be clear and free-flowing. However, this is not always the case and shaping a comfortable and smooth-running business machine requires leaders who show their commitment to diversity and their willingness to put in the appropriate work to create that environment. Building a thriving, diverse workplace is an attainable goal. There are some critical steps that managers and team leaders can take to improve communications in the diverse workplace.

- **Seek Training** – When a pipe bursts you call a plumber; when you have a problem with your refrigerator you call a repair-person. When communications break down, and you are unable to fix them seek professional advice. If you cannot resolve the communications issue, it might be time to consider bringing in a diversity coach to help develop a set of activities specifically to address your organizations issues. Developing stronger intercultural communications will result in stronger, more effective teams.
- **Value and Embrace the Differences** – Workers who understand how much they stand to benefit from diversity (including the expansion of their perspectives and horizons) will work harder to overcome communications problems stemming from diverse populations. Managers and team leaders need to display behaviors that show others that they value and embrace the differences in the diverse workplace. When your teams and employees understand this, they will work that much harder at effectively communicating. As Paul Fireman, former Reebok CEO said of people who bring diversity, “you have to make real room for them, you have to learn to listen, to listen closely, to their stories.” Fireman goes on to indicate that merely bringing new kinds of people into the workplace is meaningless unless we allow their differences to enrich and expand us.
- **Stop Making Assumptions** – We all tend to assume that others see things from our perspective. In the spring we put up Easter decorations to celebrate the holiday without considering the effect on people who celebrate holidays like Passover or Ramadan. Do not make gender or gender-identity assumptions in invitations to the spouses and families of employees. Assuming that someone is like you is more likely to alienate them.
- **Build on Similarities** – When disagreements fall on lines of diversity, look for the areas where there is agreement and build on those commonalities. If differences become confrontational, they risk becoming entrenched and dug in. Once your team members and employees acknowledge the points on which they agree, it will be that much easier for them to see from each other’s perspective and seek a collaborative answer based on open and concise communication.

Subtopic: Cultural and Generational Competencies

Cultural and generational competencies are the abilities to identify the assumptions, values, and beliefs that come from your own cultural or generational perspective, and to challenge them. These competencies enable you to understand how you answer challenges or overcome roadblocks in the way that you do. More importantly, these competencies will allow you to appreciate the way that other people with different cultural or generational backgrounds address these same challenges or roadblocks.

Cultural or generational competencies are not like a light switch, we do not either have them or not, they exist on a spectrum. So how do we put ourselves in a position to become more culturally or generationally competent? The suggestions below offer some ideas on how to expand our cultural and generational competencies.

- **Listen and Consider** – As basic and obvious as it might seem, the first step is to make sure that you willingly open yourself to explore new points of view. As in any effective communication, the most important things we can do are listen and consider. Too often our preconceptions lead us to process, judge and decide very quickly. This mental shorthand, which can help us in time-intensive situations, dramatically reduces the chance of examining new ideas and perspectives long enough to understand or appreciate them.
- **Consider Others' Backgrounds**– The more significant the understanding you have of the assumptions, values, beliefs, and backgrounds of others, the more their thought process will make sense to you. Whether or not you agree with their conclusions, understanding how they arrived at those conclusions will be helpful to you.
- **Bring Diversity to Your Thought Process** – Begin to shift your thinking by considering issues from a range of diverse perspectives culturally, ethnically, generationally and so on. Exploring problems from various points of view will bring a depth and layered complexity that will only make your thought processes that much more productive and your cultural and generational competencies that much more comprehensive.
- **Beware of Communication Informed by Biases, Prejudices, and Stereotypes** – All of us have certain biases and prejudices. It could be something as simple as you are a confirmed carnivore who finds a vegetarian lifestyle is strange. Vegetarianism is a minor prejudice, but the more successful you are at putting aside the judgments that you carry with you, the more successfully you can communicate with others in a way that displays cultural and generational competency.

Topic Review

We all seek out those collaborations in which the team is greater than the sum of its parts. Once you can avoid or overcome the potential pitfalls of communication in a diverse workplace, you will find yourself in an electric and exciting environment in which different perspectives and backgrounds lead to different solutions and innovations.

Your diverse workplace offers a host of opportunities, including a more comprehensive set of perspectives, an increased team-wide skill set, more significant innovation, and creativity, leading to increased productivity. A diverse workplace improves communication skills in all forms of communication, written, spoken, electronic, body language and more. In creating formal written or oral reports, presentations, analyses, electronic communications, texts, phone calls, even body language, the need for clarity to a disparate group of people from different backgrounds and perspective demands specificity and clarity of communication that works among a homogeneous group does not require. This required clarity of communication requires a higher degree of clarity of thought, which only enhances the quality of the work. This enhanced clarity translates directly into enhanced employee performance as well as an overall happier workplace. In turn, this translates directly into an improved organizational reputation.

The diverse workforce also comes with its' potential challenges. The greater range of diversity in your workplace, the higher the potential rewards in both the work environment and the success of the team; however, greater diversity brings with it greater potential hurdles to overcome in establishing and maintaining clear communication. Cultural or generational differences may significantly affect how people communicate. As deep as possible an understanding of the beliefs, values, and assumptions of their culture or generation will allow for the most comprehensive and satisfying communication possible. Some essential tactics to consider while trying to avoid these potential communicative pitfalls include: encouraging equal participation, addressing negative preconceptions, helping to bridge issues with language. Idiomatic language is likely to contain biases and prejudices that reflect more of the 19th or 20th century than the 21st century we live in today; try to be aware of these potentially insulting, dismissive, or discriminatory archaic lapses in our language. We all suffer from some degree of cultural ignorance; embrace differences by celebrating them in a way that educates and diminishes this ignorance. Embrace and integrate conflicting work styles so that they appropriately compliment each other.

Work to ensure that communications are open and clear in the diverse workplace. When issues arise, address them head-on, including seeking the assistance of professional training when necessary. Seeking appropriate outside help is a sign of intelligence, not a sign of weakness. Remember, when you embrace the differences and encourage others to do the same as you and your team or organization will reap the benefits. You and the rest of your team or organization should not only accept diverse perspectives but appreciate them for the range it brings to light and the way diverse thinking can create an inspirational environment. Being aware that ours is not the only perspective will help to stop making assumptions that lead divergent members of the office community from feeling like the "other." We all have so much more in common than the differences that separate us.

Working to develop our cultural and generational competencies allows us to most deeply understand and appreciate the beautiful differences that diverse members of our work community bring to the fore. The most crucial step in developing these skills, the benchmark of any good communicator, is to listen and carefully consider what others are suggesting or offering. A deeper understanding of peoples backgrounds, assumptions, values, and beliefs will help to contextualize what they are saying and contributing, while a deeper understanding of our own particular biases and prejudices will help us to put them aside.

Question(s) to Consider:

1. Consider how a diverse workforce might offer enhanced communication skills with potential customers or clients. Give several examples of how this might help enhance business opportunities in any given industry.
2. Why is it important to understand how different diverse populations communicate? How does knowing this help create a more effectively communicative diverse workforce?
3. Communications problems frequently arise in a diverse workplace. Name several ways that you go about clearing up misconceptions?
4. How can expanding your cultural and generational competencies help expand the diversity of your thought process?

Answers to Question(s) to Consider:

1. Diverse team members who speak other languages can help open up foreign markets by illuminating the language barrier. Not only do diverse team members bring knowledge of other

languages with them, but they also bring an understanding of cultural idioms. For instance, a Jewish person would understand that seeking to transact business or even hold a social business gathering on a Friday evening would conflict with the Jewish Sabbath; being familiar with the culture can inform all kinds of decisions. A person from a working-class neighborhood, or an Italian background, or the country club set, or any niche group, is much better prepared to create, develop, and market products and services for the people they know the best.

If your company is developing a series of upgrades for the dashboard of high-end Cadillac cars, you will need to have a team that includes inventors, engineers, marketing people, and other specialists. In addition to the exciting young thinkers on your team, eager to develop the next big thing in the automotive industry, you would probably also do well to include several team members who are older since Cadillacs tend to be a car bought (for the most part) by older people. Someone who is that age has a better understanding of putting these devices into use, and so could be immensely useful in creating the project. The older team members will also understand better how to market these upgrades to the intended consumer.

Sometimes you will need diversity to know your target market better, and sometimes to expand beyond your initial target market.

2. The more you understand the communications styles of each of the diverse populations represented in your workplace, the easier it will be to anticipate these issues. For instance, in an employee comes from a high-context communication group, they might be perceived to be deceitful because the words that they said do not match their actions. The words, in this case, are less important than the context surrounding those words.

Understanding the subtle differences in communications, idioms, inflections, body language and so on can forestall misunderstandings and help facilitate clearer communications. Encouraging not only clarity, but equal time in the discussion can make the difference in keeping a diverse team working together.

3. Communication misunderstandings in diverse workforces are common. Understanding the cultural and generational values, the beliefs and the assumptions can help clarify the communication, and how these employees reached their conclusions. The manager or team leader who can navigate out of issues of miscommunication is a valued resource for any business organization. However, when that is not possible, specialized professionals can be brought in to sort out and de-escalate such miscommunications.

Helping to foster understanding across cultural and generational lines can help to defuse such misunderstandings and help keep communications running smoothly.

4. The further you expand your cultural and generational competencies the more you grasp how people other than you perceive and approach problems. Once you have begun exploring issues through the prism of other perspectives, you will find yourself looking at new topics through several different perspectives, trying to come up with different solutions or discovering where different paths lead to the same answer.