



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Workplace Diversity and Developing a Language of Respect

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Today, business journals such as Forbes are highlighting how essential workplace diversity is for a thriving business. The global economy relies on a diverse chorus of voices, and companies that realize it have a competitive edge over those who don't.

Diverse teams who've learned to appreciate each other get more done and do it better. In addition to cultural and gender diversity, never before has the workplace been as multi-generational as it is now, allowing for a rich pool of both innovative and "old school" ideas.

Given the importance of a diverse workforce, how exactly can we promote inclusivity so we can benefit from its richness? An important beginning is to acknowledge what can get in the way. Perhaps the most challenging obstacle is one that's hidden: unconscious bias.

As humans, we are inherently biased. Without this cognitive short-cut we couldn't make the quick, life-saving decisions that our ancestors had to make, like "Is this person my friend, or should I run like crazy because I'm about to be attacked?!" This unconscious filter can make us assume how others "should" be, and can lead to disrespectful and dismissive behavior towards them—unintentionally, and at times, intentionally.

In the workplace, negative unconscious bias can look like:

- Multi-tasking when someone is talking to you
- Appearing distracted
- Ignoring someone's comments unless paraphrased by someone else
- Avoiding someone
- Sideways glances that can make someone wonder what you meant by them
- Voice tone and inflection that can indicate to someone that you're questioning him/her/them
- Withholding training or helping someone new in his/her/their position
- Explaining away someone's feelings of rejection or being disrespected as his/her/their "problem"—too sensitive, paranoid, hard to get along with, etc.

These experiences can be hurtful and leave someone wondering, "What do I need to change about who I am to be accepted? How can I belong?"

So, how can managers help their teams prevent misunderstandings and promote mutual respect? The first step is to acknowledge that we all bring an elaborate set of characteristics through which we compare, contrast, and interpret what we see, such as: level of education, place of birth, ethnicity, family of origin, religious beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation, traditions, cuisine, language, dress style, political affiliation, socio-economic status, personal attitudes, preferences, past experiences and opportunities, and more.

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The next step is to ask everyone to challenge their first reactions to someone by asking themselves, “Is my interpretation true or am I making assumptions here?” “Am I really listening and considering this person’s point of view?” Here are some other ways to increase mutual respect which will result in a more inclusive work environment:

- **Ask clarifying questions**—Model this process for your team. When possible, ask questions such as: “Am I understanding you correctly? Please let me know if I’m off-base.” “When you did that, I thought this—do I have this right?” Make clarifying conversations the norm in your organization and practice them as often as possible.
- **Encourage sharing of opinions and ideas**—Make it clear that everyone is welcome to share their ideas when possible. This is a great way to learn how others are perceiving the same situation. Over time, staff will develop greater insight about each other based on experience rather than on an unconscious bias.
- **Look to these basic communication rules for respectful interactions:**
 - o Avoid commenting on the cultural, ethnic or racial background, or sexual orientation of a coworker.
 - o Actively listen to others and look for visual cues that can indicate how well the exchange is going. Be responsive and engaged in the conversation.
 - o Avoid casual, off-color comments or jokes that might be offensive or tease others.
 - o If you accidentally offend someone, offer an immediate and sincere apology. Explain that you didn’t understand or recognize the root of the issue.
 - o If someone says something offensive to you, consider that he/she might not be aware of the diversity issues at hand. Calmly explain why the actions or language was inappropriate.
- **Help your employees become more culturally competent with each other.**
 - o Treat people *as they wish to be treated*, rather than *how you wish to be treated*. In a diverse group, we can all benefit from this wisdom. Here’s an example:
Some, who identify as a non-binary gender (neither male nor female), may prefer the gender pronouns they/them/their or another pronoun altogether. Or, they may simply wish to be addressed by name only. Asking this basic question about someone’s preference demonstrates respect for him/her/them.
- **Get to know one another through team potlucks or other social gatherings**—In talking about children, vacations, customs, weekend plans, and other events, people can begin to see each other for who they are, rather than who we assume them to be. Invite staff to share a family recipe or favorite food to open the way for appreciating the unique differences people bring.
- **Focus on work performance and team goals**—A shared sense of accomplishment, pride, and goodwill can build and strengthen connections between diverse individuals. These connections can act as glue to bond staff and promote a thriving inclusive workplace.
- **Utilize the EAP website for resources**—Consider viewing the *Valuing Diversity* training during a team meeting, or watch the training yourself for ideas to bring back to your team. Go to www.firstchoiceeap.com and enter “Valuing Diversity” in the search bar to access this training. If you need your company’s username, please call the EAP at (800) 777-4114.

We hope these ideas are helpful and as always, your EAP is here for consultation on any workplace issue so please don’t hesitate to call us any time at (800) 777-4114.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2012/05/13/how-companies-can-benefit-from-inclusion/#7fa84a3c223d>

<http://www.diversityjournal.com/14154-10-ways-employees-can-support-diversity-inclusion/>

<https://fch.personaladvantage.com/portal/content/10096123;subject=10003710>

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