



Workplace Diversity

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Statistics tell us that our workplaces will continue to evolve into an ever-changing environment dictated by both economics and immigration. The faces of our coworkers and schools are dictated by many variables.

What is diversity anyway? The dictionary defines it as a point or respect in which things differ; A state of difference or dissimilitude. For many people, this is a hard concept to embrace. It's a natural thing for people to choose to be with folks who appear to be more like themselves, people they can "relate" to.

Often in our work as EAP counselors, we meet with people who are experiencing difficulty on the job because they are having trouble embracing the "differences" of their coworkers. Sometimes there are serious issues, but most often the conflicts arise because they have not taken the time to get to know the person or talked about what bothered us about them.

Think for a moment about the people you encounter. There may be the younger person with body piercing, tattoos and pink hair. The older male who just lost his wife of 37 years. The single pregnant woman. The guy who announced that he is getting married to his partner. The blended families, the college intern, the homemaker returning to the workforce after many years, or the host of ethnically mixed coworkers. You get it. We are all very different perhaps on the outside, but people mostly experience the same feelings and emotions.

We will take a look at how we can all learn to "see beneath the surface" and start to appreciate the unique contributions of the workplace community. Mary Chapin Carpenter sings "We've got two lives, one we're given and the other one we choose". Try to spend some time thinking about how you choose to lead your life, and what life might be like for some of the people you encounter on a daily basis. Look beneath the surface! I'll bet you'll be surprised.

How do you communicate when you are having trouble communicating?

Several people have told me personal stories, some humorous of how they were surprised when they met the person on the other end of the phone. That has happened to many of us. We speak to someone on the phone, (or on-line) and develop mental images and often emotional responses to that voice or to the "conversation". Often we are greatly taken aback by the body that voice comes wrapped in.

One friend recalled a "Sienfeld" episode in which George's mother thought she was speaking to a woman whose last name was "Chen". She was sure this was great advice because the woman "obviously" had Chinese wisdom. She was alarmed, and felt cheated when the woman was NOT whom she had envisioned, and discounted everything she had been admiring in her "fictitious" person.

I remember many years ago sending out my resume, and being questioned about my age. Apparently I didn't look old enough to fit the bill. I would perhaps find that flattering now, but then it felt discriminatory. These are examples of when we let our preconceived ideas and stereotypes impede our relationships with other people.



How do we communicate in a world where differences in perspective, experience, culture, gender, and job functions often lead to mistrust, misunderstanding and a general reduction in productivity? We can start by breaking down stereotypes. This involves an actual willingness to do so.

Often people will segregate themselves, perhaps without meaning to. Where do you sit in the Doctor's waiting room? On a bus? In the cafeteria? Many people isolate themselves from folks who are not like them. Think about this in your own life. Are you guilty of increasing the barriers between us, or are you actively open to the idea that many people have great contributions to make if we would only close our eyes and listen.

Try Dialogue, It Works!

Learning to work and live together can be very hard work. Wouldn't it be nice if we all had the fantasy job and families of our dreams? Where everyone got along, respected one other's opinions, thought about kind things do for each other, cleaned the office coffee pot & the sink, etc, etc... You get the point!

Most of us live in a reality, which is slightly different. Often negativity towards one another, whether on the job or at home, is one way we withdraw from those around us, and in effect work to create barriers. We may have unconsciously allowed ourselves to respond to the differences we see in that person. We see them or their opinion as based upon their external presentation without giving them an opportunity to be heard. We may already think we know how the other person will respond. We then come up with preconceived stereotypes, which often lead, to increased barriers rather than to building bridges. Talking is a very effective means of opening your mind.

Dialogue is different than other forms of communication in that you are engaging in a process of discovery and disclosure. Social Scientist Daniel Yankelovich has outlined series of six steps in his book, "The Magic of Dialogue".

1. Be open and suspend judgement.
2. Keep dialogue and decision making separate.
3. Speak for yourself, not as a representative.
4. Listen with Empathy-acknowledging you have heard what others say.
5. Look for common ground-identifying areas where you agree.
6. Search for and disclose hidden assumptions, especially in yourself.

Think about ways that you might try starting a dialogue with someone this week. The new approach may have rewarding results. You may find out some new ways to tackle old problems To embrace diversity, you have to experience it.

Real Workplace Diversity

First off, I would like to thank those of you who shared your personal experiences of workplace diversity. It was very interesting to find that the line between diversity and discrimination seems often to be parallel.

During this time, I have read many articles on diversity in the workplace. Initially, I had in mind writing about diversity as it related to stirring the melting pot. According to The Urban Institute, (www.urban.org/cfm), foreign-born people make up 11% of the US population. There are also an estimated 9.3 million undocumented workers, of which 6 million are employed. This constitutes 5% of the US workforce. I quickly came to understand that this was not necessarily the diversity that we needed to single out.

From your emails, it is clear that a majority of people have issues around "American" individuals for whom they have intolerance due to a host of reasons.

Some of the issues of diversity were about stereotyping. This included issues of resentment toward certain groups such as Native Americans, and the casino issue. Outsourcing of jobs to foreign countries. Labor versus non-labored workers at the same job site. Inmates re-enter the workforce. Older workers are finding they need to work past retirement age

to get by in their golden years. Younger workers resenting that there are no jobs for them after graduating, and when they find a job, the benefits are not as good as their parents received.

Then there were the stories of diversity not by the color of our skin, but by our size, our sexual preferences, our clothing choices, even intolerance to the way the coworker's lunch smelled! Talk about live and let live!

How exactly this happens, and what we do about it, would be fodder for another several weeks. To sum it up however, I would point out that our society has been bombarding us with all sorts of ways that will make us feel superior to others. I'll return to week one when I asked you to look beneath the surface, and experiences others from a new perspective.

Tools to effectively manage diversity

Knowledge – Have all the facts before making a conclusion about any group of individuals.

Knowledge of Self – Understanding oneself and how our perceptions affect our outlook is important. Knowing our strengths and weaknesses can help us avoid pitfalls that may come from ignorance and/or feeling threatened.

Acceptance – This comes from a combination of receptiveness, being more open and relaxed while interacting with others, and respect, where we fully appreciate every individual. It is based on qualities appropriate to the task at hand. Both of these grant others freedom of behavior and style that we expect for ourselves.

Behavior – This also comes from two components: self-awareness, and our interpersonal ability to manage situations and effectively interact with those who are different from us.

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