

Communicate Clearly Across the Cultural Divide



By Bonnie Gross

ACCORDING TO THE Conference Board of Canada, four million Canadians are visible minorities and by 2016, 20 per cent of our population will be visible minorities. This growth, coupled with the baby boom generation at or approaching retirement age, is resulting in a more culturally diverse Canadian workplace. This increasingly international work environment is presenting organizations with both distinct advantages and some unique challenges. HR professionals, in particular, are facing new issues when it comes to bringing global cultures together within the corporate culture.

Communication issues can be a major stumbling block to creating a positive, productive work environment. The

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success of any organization, regardless of industry or size, is based on the ability to convey information clearly, confidently and precisely. No matter how bright and knowledgeable your team, they need to be able to communicate effectively or risk misunderstandings or missed opportunities.

If a message is unclear, the listener may lack direction, become confused and too embarrassed to say so, or be left feeling uninspired. The speaker may end up locked out of opportunities for advancement and not understand why. Managers or HR professionals may find themselves in the awkward situation of having to tell an employee that they don't understand their accent, which may be seen as politically incorrect or even rude. But not saying something can be just as unfair.

To help one of its call centres to communicate more effectively, TD Canada Trust ran a professional speaking skills program where employees learned and practiced pronunciation, word stress, rhythm, pacing, and appropriate intonation for different situations. A post-training assessment showed that overall communications improved dramatically. Intelligibility, or the ability for an inexperienced listener to understand the individual who is speaking, increased from

60 per cent to 85 per cent over a 10 week period.

Helping employees improve their communications skills is more about enabling them to speak clearly and confidently and less about neutralizing an accent. Employees participating in such a program can increase their job satisfaction and loyalty to the organization. Many course participants go on to report a greater feeling of belonging within the work environment and value for their employer.

An HR professional's ability to identify and understand how cultural nuances can impede communication and workflow is critical to creating an environment that isn't bogged down by stereotypes. Pronunciation and intonation are the most common verbal communication issues, largely because of the varying sounds, rhythms and tones used around the world and the different meanings they can convey. For instance, Indian or Chinese dialects have no V sound, so speakers tend to replace it with a W. In the Canadian office, this can result in the speaker saying something completely different than what is intended—like saying wine instead of vine.

The R sound is also pronounced in many different ways—rolled on the tongue in Spanish or sounding more like L in Chinese. "Th" is not a sound used in many other languages, either. Not only is it challenging to learn how to pronounce, sticking out your tongue out to produce the "th" sound can be considered rude in many cultures.

In addition to pronunciation issues, emphasis on particular phrases and words, or lack of it, can create confusion when people from different countries are brought together. A feature of the way English is spoken in India is to put equal stress on all syllables and words in a sentence. Conversely, Canadians tend to stress specific words to convey the meaning of the statement. A person's pace when speaking can also be misinterpreted. Spanish-speaking people tend to learn to talk at a rapid rate so when they speak in English, it can sound too fast-paced and hard to follow.

Even mannerisms and body language can create a cultural divide within the workplace. Eastern European professionals are taught that smiling is inappropriate in business settings, so they may be mistaken for being unapproachable or angry. In China, it is not appropriate to speak unless spoken to or to praise yourself. In Canada, this is often interpreted as a lack of confidence. ♻️

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