



Communication Tools for Multicultural Workplaces

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Siddarth Apaya came to Canada from India in 2004. Having spoken English his entire life, he thought his English skills were very good. Unfortunately, he was having difficulty being understood.

“I discovered I was wrong. I would make a simple statement and people would say: ‘What’s that? Can you repeat it?’”

“It was the way I said things that was holding me back to succeed in corporate career in North America.”

Apaya’s experience in the Canadian workplace is not unique. According to the Conference Board of Canada, four million Canadians are visible minorities and by 2016, 20 per cent of our population will be immigrants to Canada. Growth in immigration, and a Baby Boom generation rapidly nearing retirement, is causing major shifts in the look and feel of the Canadian workplace.

Communication issues can present many challenges to HR professionals when it comes to creating a positive, productive work environment. The common undercurrent of any successful organization is the ability to convey information clearly, confidently and precisely. Not being able to communicate effectively risks misunderstanding and missed opportunities.

Managers and HR professionals may find themselves in the awkward situation of having to tell an employee that they don’t understand their accent, which they may see as politically incorrect or inappropriate. HR’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.

Common communication challenges

Pronunciation and intonation are the most common 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 around the world, for instance it may be rolled on the tongue in Spanish or sound more like L in Chinese.

“Th” is a sound not common in most other languages, either. Not only is it challenging to learn how to pronounce, sticking out your tongue out to produce the “th” sound can actually be considered rude in many cultures.

In addition to these types of pronunciation issues, emphasis or a lack of emphasis on particular phrases and words can create confusion when people from different countries are brought together.

For example, a feature of the way English is spoken in India is to put equal stress on all syllables and words in a sentence. So to a native English speaker raised in Canada, this comes across as sounding atonal and confusing because Canadians tend to stress specific words to convey the meaning of the statement.

A person's pace when speaking can also cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Spanish-speaking people tend to learn to talk at a rapid rate, which means that when they speak in English, it can sound too fast-paced and hard to follow.

Even mannerisms and body language can cause a cultural divide within the workspace. 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, however, this is often interpreted as a lack of confidence.

How HR can create a multicultural corporate culture

When a team member has difficulty communicating to colleagues, they can often find themselves locked out of opportunities for advancement and not understanding why.

To avoid misunderstandings in the workplace, organizations are finding that it pays to have employees improve their communication skills with the help of a qualified instructor or professional speaking skills program. With repetitive enunciation exercises to retrain tongue movement and a supportive workplace, an employee can overcome most communication issues.

Courses can be a great way to increase awareness of communication issues that can occur in a multicultural workplace — from English expressions to written correspondence — as give HR professionals effective tools for handling problems before they occur.

"For me, it took practice, practice, practice, to make sure I put stress in the right places," says Apaya. "It did not come immediately, but now it feels natural to me."

The goal should never be to "neutralize" or "Canadianize" a person's accent. A person's multicultural heritage can be extremely valuable in a today's global marketplace. An accent immediately identifies someone as having a global perspective, and reveals that the individual is either bilingual or multilingual.

Instead, helping employees improve their communications skills should be about improving intelligibility so neither the speaker nor the listener has to struggle.

In fact, TD Canada Trust has been able to improve overall intelligibility by 60 to 85 per cent by offering a professional speaking skills program for one of its call centre teams. Covering topics such pronunciation, word stress, rhythm, pacing, and appropriate intonation for different situations, the program helped improve overall communication.

The added benefit to professional speaking programs is an increase in job satisfaction and loyalty to the organization. Beyond ensuring more clear communications within the work environment, they can also learn common expressions that helps teams bond socially.

In fact, many employees who have participated in professional speaking skills programs often report a greater feeling of belonging within the work environment and valued their employer for helping them gain more confidence.

Make the most of a valuable asset

With immigrants accounting for 70 per cent of the growth of Canada's labour force, managing cultural difference will become even more important for both organizations collectively and employees individually. Given that 70 per cent of immigrants to Canada also have some sort of post-secondary or specialized training, it's critical for organizations to ensure that communication issues don't prevent them from capitalizing on this valuable resource.

For Siddarth Apaya, enhancing his ability to communicate more clearly through the aid of professional speaking courses has helped him overcome the challenges that were holding him back from pursuing his career goals. He no longer has to repeat himself to colleagues and finds that management has an easier time understanding what he has to offer.

"I feel more confident and I can see people pay more attention to me. If you don't get around that fear of saying something wrong, you will never get the attention you deserve."

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