

Cultivating Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace

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It is important to strive towards a diverse workplace—but if it's not harmonious, it won't work. Cultural misunderstandings can lead to false assumptions and mismatched expectations. Tessa Desatnik highlights some examples of cross-cultural workplace challenges and how cross-cultural training can be used to effectively address them.

Canada is known for being a cultural mosaic, welcoming people from all around the world to emigrate and settle here. It's truly a beautiful opportunity, and something I have benefitted from since moving from South Africa many years ago. Toronto, in particular, is widely recognized as the **most multicultural city in the world**.

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Diversity is not only positive on a societal level. In the workplace, it has been shown to deliver

positive results—including attracting the best talent, better innovation, enhanced creativity, and improved financial results.

While these benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) are widely seen in the workplace, I have also frequently seen obstacles that can affect these positive and desirable outcomes. Have we understood and identified the specific relevant cultural differences and associated challenges? Have we then been able to bridge this gap and support employees to adapt to the current professional cultural expectations needed for successful inclusion? This takes effort from both leaders and employees.

Challenges in harnessing diversity in the workplace

For example, while in the Canadian context leaders encourage their employees to provide their opinion and **challenge the status quo**, in some cultures this behaviour would be inappropriate and seen as rude and disrespectful. The result? A very capable and dedicated employee with the latter cultural perspective may be seen as not contributing enough to the discourse and team. This, in turn, could affect the perception of the employee and negatively impact their progression within the company.

With over 25 years of experience working with corporations, globally in communications and executive presence, I have helped many individuals and teams overcome the obstacles that can arise from different communication styles. In the past 10 years, I have seen that, with the appropriate understanding of cultural differences, the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of each employee can be better appreciated and utilized. This results in employees feeling seen, understood, and respected which, in turn, has positive results for the organization.

Examples of cross-cultural workplace challenges

Example 1: I recently worked with a client from Nigeria who was hired in a managerial role. I will call this person Ema*. Not long after she was hired, Ema’s direct reports complained that she was harsh and negative with her feedback. This was a surprise to her manager, HR lead, and me, as our exchanges with her had always been quite the opposite. Her actions and supposed attitude made her appear harsh, unaware, and disengaged from her direct reports. However, this was an example of a cultural component at play and not an individual incompetency.

Instead of demoting Ema, we were able to communicate the real issue at hand and explore these cultural nuances between Canada and her home country so that both she and her manager had a clearer grasp of these differences. Together, they identified the current expectations and supported Ema as she chose to adapt certain key behaviours. These shifts in behaviour allowed her to achieve the desired outcome while staying true to herself. She was now able to successfully navigate professional interactions and the feedback from her manager reflected this growth. This understanding led to empowerment, engagement, and connection.

Example 2: I will call this client Mira*, an East Asian female working in the pharmaceutical industry. Feedback from her performance reviews described her as shy and encouraged her to be more assertive. This led to increased frustration on Mira's side, not understanding what led to this feedback. She would not describe herself as shy! How was she being misinterpreted? She completed an assessment, and we identified some cultural gaps. Once again, it became clear that the professional cultural norms in her home country were quite different from those in Canada.

For instance, Mira explained that according to the cultural norms she was raised with, direct eye contact and multiple hand gestures were considered inappropriate or disrespectful. When Mira learned, through our sessions together, that in a Canadian context, a strong voice and eye contact are effective means of showing confidence and engaging and connecting with your audience, this was an a-ha! moment for her. The outcome—her interactions with her leader, colleagues, and other stakeholders improved significantly. This was a game changer for her. Mira now felt empowered, informed, and received overwhelmingly positive feedback from her supervisor and colleagues.

Also, of note in each example, both the employees and their managers needed to adapt and lean into this growth. It wasn't only up to the employees, their managers had to take responsibility for understanding the cultural norms their employees were used to working within.

Supporting people in the workplace

In each example, cross-cultural training helped correct misinformed judgments and allowed both parties to understand themselves and each other through a broader cultural lens. This process was enriching for and respectful of all involved. A new path had now been established to achieve successful personal and business outcomes.

My approach is not at all about forcing changes in behaviours to conform with domestic norms.

Nor is it about one culture being right and the other wrong. They are simply different. Working closely with everyone involved, we identify and create an awareness of the nuances in behavioural expectations that may be misinterpreted. From there, we work together to find the best way forward to communicate and contribute expertise, all while honouring and respecting the individual and cultural norms—both current and past.

The need for cross-cultural training in the workplace: maximizing diversity AND inclusion

There are many advantages to a diverse workforce—both in business success and fostering an inclusive and positive organizational culture. To reap the greatest benefits, we cannot overlook the importance of providing relevant support to help employees of all backgrounds reach their full potential.

From the company's standpoint, if not addressed, cultural misunderstandings can lead to false assumptions and mismatched expectations. This lack of cultural awareness can hinder an organization's progress, manifesting in more meetings, needing to redo tasks, lower general productivity, and employee turnover.

Moreover, according to Jane Hyun & Audrey S. Lee in their book Flex: The New Playbook for Managing Across Differences, "If left unattended, research indicates that diversity can negatively affect the team's cohesion and increase miscommunication and conflict." This, in turn, could lead to retention issues, affecting the organization's bottom line.

We are proudly a diverse and multi-cultural country. Harmony among people of different backgrounds and norms may not come without effort. However, taking steps to provide the knowledge, respect, and support to help employees of all backgrounds succeed not only benefits your organizational culture, but it's also likely to help with the bottom line as well.

*All names have been changed for confidentiality

How to Solve the Right Problem During Workplace Challenges

Learn how

Our Contributors

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