Diversity in the Workplace: How to Bridge the Gaps – Handout



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Today's workforce is rich in diversity. Working together are people of different ages, cultures, physical abilities, education, sexual orientation, language and religious beliefs. Each of us is unique, and our different strengths and perspectives contribute to the strength of our teams.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

To work together safely, it is important to remember that different backgrounds can influence a person's approach to communications, risk-taking, work processes, teamwork or even compliance with rules.

Example

In some cultures, open communication with someone in a position of authority is unheard of. So instead of showing disrespect to your boss, your co-worker may say that he understands a safety rule when, in fact, he doesn't.

There are communication differences across the generations, too. Young workers, wanting to be seen as valuable to the organization, may loudly contribute suggestions or opinions. To their older co-workers, who, early in their careers were taught not to speak unless spoken to, this behavior might seem disrespectful and create some unnecessary tension between the workers.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Ultimately, though, all co-workers must share one common goal: to create a safe workplace. But how does everyone cooperate to prevent incidents if someone on the team views assistance as weakness, or considers obscene a hand gesture intended to say "ok"?

Here are some ways you can bridge the communications gap in your diverse workforce:

- Don't buy in to stereotypes. Get to know your fellow workers as individual persons.
- Listen and learn about other cultures, customs and lifestyles. And convey your desire to be sensitive to your differences as early as possible. Showing sincere

respect for your co-worker is about the best first impression you can make.

- Give the benefit of the doubt in your dealings with fellow workers. Instead of feeling slighted or insulted, consider the possibility that mannerisms or words may have a different meaning in another culture or generation.
- Be honest and tell the person where you are coming from. For example, you can say “I don’t know if risk creates excitement for you, but at this stage of my life I don’t need that much excitement. So I want you to tie that ladder off before you climb it.”
- Lead by example. Help your co-workers develop safe work habits and encourage them to speak up if they have any concerns related to safety and health.
- Rethink the golden rule. Individuals have different values or different ways of showing values. So rather than treating others as *you’d want them to treat you*, treat others as *they’d want you to treat them*.
- There’s no such thing as a trivial ethnic or sexist joke. One offensive joke can weaken the whole team. Do not make jokes about race, ethnic origin, sex or any other topic that could be offensive, and discourage others from making such remarks.

FINAL WORD

Learn how to bridge communication gaps. Because no matter how diverse the workforce, all workers have one thing in common: the desire to go home safely.