

26. Professionalism in Today's Workforce

JUST THE FACTS: The face of the workplace is constantly evolving as one generation begins to retire and another moves up to take its place. In 2010, an office may have a mix of baby boomers (and older), Gen X-ers, and Gen Y-ers (Millennials) all working together. In addition to generational differences, differences in education, upbringing, social norms, and values may create cultural gaps that may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts at times. In reality, a variety of perspectives in the workplace can actually benefit and strengthen an organization. The purpose of this activity is to have participants discuss how to bridge generational, cultural, and other diversity gaps in order to build a new standard for professionalism in the workplace.



Time

30 minutes



Materials

- Optional: Flip chart/markers
- Activity 26 (The Cultural Divide)



Directions

Today's workforce is made up of people from many different generations. In fact, some workplaces include people ranging in age from 16 to 70 (or older) all working together. How can these different generations of workers all get along when so often their values, ideas, and experiences are so different?

Begin a discussion around something like:

- What do you think the older generation thinks of the younger generation? [Examples may include: lazy, lack of loyalty and respect, need for constant feedback, unrealistic (expect to get to the top right away)]
- What does your generation think of the older generations? [Examples may include: inflexible, slow, set in their ways, technologically incompetent]
- Do you think these ideas are always true? Sometimes true? Never true? Why do you think each group may have these ideas about the other group?

Discuss the word "stereotype." Use the following for discussion or use a definition from another source: According to the online Urban Dictionary, a stereotype is used to categorize a group of people. When we stereotype groups of people, we depict all people within that group as having the same characteristics.

What causes these stereotypes? How can our society rid itself from grouping people by stereotypes?

Divide the larger group into groups of no more than four. Each group will be using Activity 26 to discuss some of the situations that might create a “cultural divide” in the workplace. Discuss the small group answers as a larger group.



Conclusion

Draw out a list of some of the strategies one can use on the job to ensure that everybody works well together (not just different generations). Discuss some of the proactive steps one might take to ensure stereotyping does not occur on the job. Some examples might include:

- Look past stereotypes
- Find common ground
- Learn from each other
- Listen to each other
- Acknowledge and appreciate differences
- Promote intergenerational discussions



Journaling Activity

Think about a time when someone made a biased judgment about you or acted unfairly toward you because of your age, skin color, clothes you were wearing, gender, the way you speak, where you live, how much money your family has, or some other reason. Why do you think those assumptions were made about you? How did that experience make you feel? How do you think you should have been treated in that situation?



Extension Activity

Connect with an employer who can talk about diversity in the workplace - its importance, its relevance, and how most companies strive for workplaces that are free of stereotyping (of all kinds) and full of diversity.

You may also wish to delve further into a discussion about groups who tend to face stereotyping and stigma (such as people with disabilities, people of color, people with criminal backgrounds, teen parents, certain cultures, etc.) and what a world without stigma and prejudice might look and feel like. Participants can work together to come up with a slogan or educational campaign for promoting a workforce that truly celebrates diversity and inclusion.

Activity 26. The Cultural Divide

Today's workforce is very diverse. People of different ages and backgrounds are working alongside one another more so today than ever before. The purpose of this activity is to consider how we perceive others and how others may perceive us, as well as whether or not these perceptions paint an accurate picture of who we are. Consider the following situations:

Sandra is 19 years old and has her first job as an administrative assistant. She wears very low cut shirts, short skirts, heels, and lots of perfume.

What might Sandra's attire lead others to believe about her? What might the reality be?

Tony is 24 years old. He has tattoo sleeves on both of his arms, as well as a name tattooed on his neck. Tony would like to be a waiter at a very fancy restaurant. He has first interview today.

What might a job interviewer think of Tony? What might the reality be?

Terrence is 18 years old and just graduated high school (where he had a 4.0 average). Terrence has an interview today for a summer internship. Terrence is a wheelchair user.

Do you think there is a chance that the interviewer might not ask Terrence the same interview questions he or she would ask of someone who isn't in a wheelchair? Why or why not?

Marissa is in 10th grade. She comes from a family of mechanics. Her dad and three brothers are mechanics, and her grandfather owns a garage. Marissa has secretly wanted to work on cars but has been afraid to tell her family. She now wants to approach her grandfather for a summer job. Why do you think Marissa has kept her career dream a secret? How might she ask her grandfather for a summer job?

Ruthie is 62 years old and is looking for a job. She loves one of the local clothing stores and applied online for a job as a sales clerk. She has an interview today and is afraid the store manager will be much younger than her. Ruthie considers canceling the interview.

Why do you think Ruthie is worried about her interview? What would you tell Ruthie?

Sam is 20 years old, a sophomore in college and is looking for an engineering internship. Sam has Asperger syndrome (a form of autism), and while he has an A average in his engineering courses, he recognizes the fact that he has trouble interacting socially and is worried about his interviews. Why do you think Sam is worried about his interviews? What advice would you give Sam?