

# Improving Relationships among Culturally-Diverse Staff

*By Sondra Thiederman*

According to a recent survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute, 52 percent of Americans prefer to work with people like themselves while only 34 percent would rather be with colleagues who are ethnically or culturally different. Clearly those in the 52 percent would be very uncomfortable in America's health care industry where cultural diversity has come to be the norm.

At first glance, this statistic seems to indicate that the majority of those surveyed are racist and regard themselves as superior to people of different races and cultures. No one would, of course, deny that racism is a challenge in America's workplace, but we need to remember that most discomfort with diversity comes, not from racism, but instead from an ignorance of how to behave around people of different backgrounds.

This climate of discomfort and confusion can be found in hospitals and clinics throughout the country. One young nurse, for example, in a large medical center in Chicago, said, "Sometimes I just don't understand what is going on around me. There are so many accents, so many ways of doing things, it leaves me very muddled." No ethnic group or race is immune to feeling lost in a multicultural environment. Recently, a Latino admittance clerk at a southern California hospital told me of his confusion with Asians. As he put it, "There are a lot of Latinos at the hospital and most of them I understand. It's the Asians that I don't understand very well." Clearly, the discomfort created by growing diversity, especially in the health care industry, is an issue for all of us.

## Issues That Can Divide Us

There are, of course, dozens of issues that can divide us in a multicultural workplace. Here is just a sampling of those which are most often found in health care facilities throughout the country.

### 1. Language Differences

The issue which is most apt to cause discomfort in the workplace is language. The challenges of working in a multi-lingual environment are many. Accents, for one, can make it very difficult to understand what the other person is saying. For the native-English speaker, understanding the words of immigrants whose native languages do not

share the roots of English can be most difficult. Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific-Island languages, for example, are structured around a phonetic system that sounds strange to the ear accustomed to hearing only English. In reverse, those who learned Vietnamese, Tagalog, or Korean as their primary languages can have difficulty understanding an American accent even when their English vocabulary is fluid.

Multiple languages being spoken in the workplace can be another source of tension. One supervisor expressed a common complaint in a recent cultural diversity workshop. When asked about the most common challenges encountered in her multicultural medical center, she quickly responded, "It's all the languages. My staff keep coming to me to say that so-and-so is talking about them. When I ask how they know this, it usually turns out that the other person was speaking a foreign-language in their presence. I don't know what to do about it, but it definitely creates bad feelings." Tensions created by language differences can work in the other direction as well. Native-born Americans, for example, whose only language is English, are often insensitive to the challenges faced by a foreign-born colleague, or patient for that matter, and rush through instructions, use slang, and generally make it difficult for their message to be understood. We will be covering the issue of language-diversity in a later piece, but for now the important thing to remember is that communication is a two-way process and it is a two-way responsibility. It is the obligation of all colleagues to work together, no matter what their language background, to communicate effectively.

## **2. Differences in Values and Etiquette**

Scholars who study cultural diversity agree that the primary value that distinguishes American culture from much of the rest of the world is America's emphasis on the individual over the group. We tend to reward individual effort, emphasize individual responsibility, and give credit for individual achievement. This value is clearly seen in the grammatical oddity that English is the only major language in which the pronoun "I" is capitalized. By contrast, 70 percent of the rest of the world is more concerned with the needs and responsibilities of the group. Members of what are called "collectivist" cultures live their lives for the good of the group. To abandon that obligation is considered a violation of the most dearly-held of cultural values.

If you think about it for a minute, you can think of some ways in which this difference in values is manifested in the workplace. Perhaps, for example, you have encountered colleagues who seem uncomfortable when complimented in front of others or when selected for the honor of "worker of the month." Maybe you know someone from a group-oriented culture who refused a promotion because she was uncomfortable being elevated above the group. As you study diversity further, you will gradually see that group versus individualistic cultural differences can affect a wide-variety of workplace relationships.

It may surprise you to learn that another value that can create confusion in the workplace is respect for authority. American managers have noticed that many immigrant staff have more respect for authority than do their native-born counterparts. This respect stems from the hierarchical structure of many cultures. Although at first glance this attitude appears to be a good thing -- and in many contexts it is -- respect for authority can lead to serious misunderstandings in the multicultural workplace. To those supervisors, for example, who are accustomed to employees disagreeing with them,

raising ideas of their own, and voicing complaints, employees who keep these thoughts to themselves can leave the false impression of not caring about the job or not having any ideas to share. In all-likelihood the respectful employee is simply acting on the Thai proverb, "The manager has been bathed in hot water." In other words, many immigrants believe that the boss has proven him or herself and knows better than anyone else how to do the job.

Another value that can differ across cultures has to do with how friendships are formed. In America, we tend to build relationships quickly. Women, in particular, reveal relatively intimate information about themselves on fairly short acquaintance. Similarly, invitations are often casually and quickly extended. Colleagues are apt to say things like, "Let's get together sometime," or "You ought to come to my house for dinner one night," without really having any interest in making it happen. Similarly, when changing jobs in America, we are apt to cavalierly say that we will "keep in touch" knowing full-well that in all likelihood we will never see our former colleagues again.

This casual forming and dissolving of relationships can be most disconcerting to immigrant employees particularly to those from Latino and Asian cultures who pride themselves on forming relationships slowly and, once they are formed, cultivating those relationships as permanent parts of their lives. To the native-born American, this slow building of relationships is apt to create a false impression of coldness which can contribute to disharmony and conflict in the workplace. To the immigrant, the casual way with which Americans form and dissolve friendships can be confusing and, in many cases, hurtful.

### **3. Tone of voice**

Think about it for a minute. Have you ever had an encounter with someone from another culture who seemed to be rude or demanding only to discover later that he or she had no intention of sounding that way? There are a number of reasons why this happens. The tonal structure of many languages -- for example, some of the East Indian and Pakistani dialects -- simply do not translate very harmoniously into English. Because of the harshness of tone, someone from these countries might sound inadvertently rude when making a request or statement.

If you add to tone of voice the fact that many immigrants are not familiar with the way Americans soften requests, it is easy to see how bad feelings might result. In America we tend to soften our demands by making them a question or by adding extra words. We might, for example, say to a waitress, "Can I have another cup of coffee when you have a chance?" In fact, what we really want to say is, "Bring me a cup of coffee right now!"

By contrast, people from many other countries soften demands, not by making them questions or adding extra words, but instead by changing verb forms or pronoun forms. In Tagalog, for example, the primary language of the Philippines, it is common to add the prefix paki- to verbs in order to soften them. When deprived of this grammatical device, many immigrants are at a loss for how to express their wishes without sounding rude or demanding. America's peculiar practices of "telling" someone to do something by asking them if they are willing to do it seems very strange indeed and is difficult to grasp.

### **4. "Clustering"**

Clustering means the habit of primarily sitting with, talking to, and "hanging around" people who are like oneself. Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with clustering, it can create the impression of exclusion and even racism. No matter what the group involved -- be it Anglo, African-American, Asian, Latino -- when we routinely congregate with those who are like ourselves culturally or racially, it can be misinterpreted to mean that we regard our own group as better than others.

The answer to this challenge is not to try to break up the practice. Taking this approach is not only unnecessary, but also artificial, intrusive, and possibly illegal. The answer, instead, is to use some of the techniques mentioned here to understand the practice better. Understanding why something is done is the first step toward diffusing the discomfort and conflicts that the practice can inadvertently cause.

## **Solutions to Culturally-Rooted Conflicts**

### **1. Ask**

Most of us were taught that asking questions is an effective strategy for gathering information. Many of you no doubt recall the adage, "there is no such thing as a stupid question." Of course there are certain taboo subjects that you do not ask about -- money, sex, and religion come to mind. Unfortunately, for many people, cultural differences are also on this list. Somewhere along the line, we got the idea that it is not alright to ask about someone's culture or ethnicity -- that acknowledging openly that there might be a cultural difference between people is disrespectful and patronizing. The truth is quite the opposite. Asking others about their cultures is a logical and genteel way of avoiding the kinds of misunderstandings that can create intercultural conflicts in the workplace.

Take, for example, the colleague who does not want to be named worker-of-the month. It is all-too-easy to misinterpret that reluctance as passivity or lack of interest in the job. How can you know the true reason? By asking. This is not to say that there will always be a cultural reason behind an unfamiliar behavior -- sometimes it simply reflects a personal preference -- but even finding that out will help you relate better to someone whom you might otherwise judge negatively.

Asking is the most efficient way to gather information. Here are some tips that will make your inquiries most effective:

- Do not ask about something when you are irritated. No matter how much you try to hide it, your aggravation will show and will cause the other person to feel defensive and reluctant to share the very information you need.
- Relate your question back to your own sometimes mysterious behavior and culture. The straight-forward American, for example, might say something like, "Sometimes I know people think that I'm really bossy, but I don't mean to be -- that's just my cultural style." You can then move into your question having established a climate of openness and cultural sharing.
- Even if you do not like the behavior you are asking about, do not be accusatory or judgmental. I realize that in some cases, particularly when you do not understand what is going on, this can be easier said than done. Bear in mind,

however, that once you have uncovered the real reason for the behavior, your anger will almost invariably be diffused.

- When you find yourself hesitating to ask something because you feel it would appear patronizing or intrusive, ask yourself this question: Would you ask this type of question of someone from your own culture? If the answer is "yes," you can be assured that it is a legitimate inquiry that you have every right make.

## **2. Seeking Commonalities**

One of the dangers of studying cultural differences is that it can cause us to focus more on how we differ than on the commonalities which bind us. As we learn and ask about differences in body language, etiquette, and values, we forget that underneath those features -- underneath what we might call the "cloak of culture" -- are commonalities which all human beings share. Foremost among those are the desire for human dignity, the need for survival and physical comfort, and the wish for companionship and respect. Perhaps individuals manifest the need for these things differently -- an Asian, for example, might gain more dignity from anonymity in the group than in the individual recognition which would be more palatable to many native-born Americans -- but these common needs are nonetheless a universal component of the human condition.

Commonalities can go beyond these larger values to include common preferences, tastes, and life experiences. One of the best ways to find these commonalities is to consciously reach out to colleagues in order to identify what you share. If you are of Asian background, for example, you might tend to assume that none of your native-born American colleagues are interested in learning about your relatives. You might, therefore, never mention them, thus keeping a very important part of your life secret from a colleague who might, much to your surprise, share a similar loyalty to extended family members. On the other hand, if you were born in the United States and hold dearly to the value of individual achievement, you might find yourself assuming that your immigrant colleagues have no understanding of your goals. Maybe it is a hobby, a sport, or a taste in music that you assume you can't share. In all these case you have missed the opportunity to identify a common interest or perspective on which you can build.

Here are some tips that will guide you in establishing areas of commonality:

- Be prepared to be rebuffed. As in any relationship, your effort to establish commonalities may not prove successful. Do not let this discourage you. Just because the first subject you try does not strike a common cord is no reason to give up on the effort.
- Watch for opportunities. During conversations in which interests and topics are being shared, be alert to subjects you can comment on and which relate back to your own experience.
- Communicate genuine interest in the other person. One of the great advantages to working in a multicultural workplace is the opportunity to learn about other peoples and other ways of doing things. As you show interest in alternative lifestyles and beliefs, you will be amazed at the common areas of agreement that will emerge.

## **3. Do not project your own culture onto others.**

If we define "culture" as a "socially transmitted design for living," it is obvious that everybody has one. It might be American culture, the culture of your native country, even the values and beliefs that are common to people from your region, occupation, or workplace.

Every culture dictates what is most important to us and how we behave. To many Americans, for example, individuality, ambition, and risk taking are important values. Having a culture and having values that are associated with that culture is a good thing. The problem arises when we project those values onto other people; in other words, when we make the mistake of assuming that colleagues from other cultures are doing what they are doing for the same reasons we would.

Assume, for example, that you have a colleague who builds relationships slowly and who is hesitant to reveal personal information about herself. This restrained behavior -- behavior which we have seen is characteristic of many immigrant cultures -- is in sharp contrast to the American tendency to form friendships quickly and to be open and forthright with personal information. Because of this contrast, there is the temptation to project American values onto others and assume them to be cold just because they develop relationships at a more leisurely pace.

Likewise, colleagues from other cultures are in constant danger of projecting their own cultures onto native-born Americans. A Japanese employee, for example, might, in light of the Japanese value of saving face, assume that the American who voices his complaints openly is angry or rude. In fact, in America this "tell-it-like-it-is" approach has little to do with anger or rudeness and more with the desire to be honest and efficient.

It is because of this tendency for all of us to project our cultures onto others that we must take great care to evaluate any behavior from the cultural perspective of the other person, not from the perspective of our own values and practices. From things as simple as differing ideas of proper eye contact to more complex ideas like why a person might not seek a promotion, the trick is to recognize that there may be a cultural difference in motivation and, in turn, to ask for an explanation from the people involved.

#### **4. Communicating Respect**

Showing respect for others is probably the single most important thing we can do to build harmony between cultures. I am not saying that you have to like everyone equally or even agree with their ways. What you do need to do is acknowledge and respect every individual's right to be who they are and make an effort to communicate respect even in the small things. Here are some examples of ways which can go far toward making your colleagues feel that they are getting the respect which every human being needs and deserves:

- Call people by their preferred form of address. This might be by the first name, last name, or by the use of a title.
- Pronounce people's names correctly. Admittedly, some non-English names can be very difficult to pronounce, but it is worth the effort in light of the good feelings correct pronunciation can create. Ask your colleagues how to pronounce their names, write them out in phonetic English and practice saying them. If you

- forget, ask again. Each time you demonstrate your willingness to try, you will be building a bond that will permanently improve your cross-cultural relationships.
- Find out what countries people are from. To say, for example, that someone is from "Asia" without naming a country is roughly like indicating that the native-born American is from the "Western World." Be specific. There is as much difference between a Filipino and a Korean as between an American and a Frenchman.
  - Learn a few words of the languages spoken in your workplace. You do not need to learn all the languages nor even all of one language. What I am talking about here is learning a few words of courtesy such as: "Good morning," "How are you?," "Have a nice weekend," or even "Happy Birthday." Ask your colleagues how to say different things. If you find yourself afraid to try because of fear of looking foolish, remember that your immigrant colleagues are struggling to speak English every moment of their work day.

Mutual respect is at the heart of every harmonious workplace. If you look back at the suggestions above -- from asking questions to looking for commonalities -- you will discover that they are nothing more than ways of showing those around you that you respect them enough to learn who they are and what they have to contribute as individual human beings.

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