

Supporting a Diverse Environment at Work



Workplace

Workplace diversity refers to the variety of differences between people in an organization. Diversity can include race, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, age, personality, tenure, educational background, cognitive style and more.

Diversity is supported by creating a respectful workplace culture where the physical, psychological and social well-being of all employees is valued. In a respectful workplace:

- People are treated as they wish to be treated.
- Employees are valued.
- Communication is polite and courteous.
- Conflict is addressed in a positive and respectful manner.
- Disrespectful and harassing behaviors are addressed.

Benefits of Creating a Supportive and Diverse Workplace Environment

Creating a workplace environment where everyone is welcome and valued is important to an individual's well-being. On an organizational level, learning to capitalize on the strengths of your employees—with their diverse characteristics—can make your organization more effective.

Employees with different viewpoints are more likely to generate creative solutions and less likely to just follow along with the crowd. They may also be more likely to identify potential challenges and to avoid significant mistakes.

Organizational Initiatives That Support Diversity

Organizations can support diversity by offering quality of work and life initiatives for employees that advance the interests of a diverse workforce and assist with retention. These initiatives can include:

- Alternative work schedules
- Family-friendly leave programs
- Part-time employment and job sharing
- Telecommuting
- Dependent care support programs
- Employee assistance program services (EAPs)

Organizations can also support diversity and inclusion by ensuring that supervisors and managers are provided leadership and diversity training. Their understanding of the benefits and rewards of a diverse workforce helps create a supportive work environment that enhances the potential of all employees from the top down.

Individual Communication Methods to Support Diversity

We spend on average 2,000 hours a year with our co-workers. Knowing how to communicate with colleagues based on their role in the workplace, and not what makes them a diverse co-worker, is an important part of helping to promote balance, equality and growth.

Here are some effective communication methods that can help you support diversity:

Work to resolve misunderstandings. If you accidentally offend someone, offer an immediate and sincere apology. Conversely, if someone says something offensive to you, consider that he or she might not be aware of the diversity issues at hand. Calmly explain why his or her actions or language are inappropriate.

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Use active listening. Often we only half-listen to what others are saying and we are distracted with another thought or activity. Active listening is a skill that takes time to develop and allows us to prevent conflict. Concentrate on receiving the information that the other person is telling you. Eliminate distractions and have a genuine interest in understanding the other person, instead of just waiting to comment.

Paraphrase. This has been called “mirroring,” or reflecting back to the speaker what he or she has just said. Paraphrasing serves two purposes. One, it keeps you paying attention so you can summarize what you have said. You’ll also remember it better having had to say it yourself. Two, the other person will feel more understood, or if you got the message wrong, can correct or fine-tune what he or she meant to say. Use lead-ins, such as “It sounds like...,” “Let me get this right, you...” or “I’m confused, do you mean...?”

Seek and provide feedback. By providing and giving feedback, the person speaking will know that you are paying attention. For example, words like “yes,” and “I understand” will encourage the speaker to continue communicating.

Pay attention to your body language. Appropriate facial expressions or smiles, head nods and attentive posture are all ways to show the speaker that you are actively listening and engaged in the conversation.

Use “I” statements. “I” statements are a way to diffuse potential arguments or difficult statements by allowing the speaker to self-disclose feelings or vulnerability without sounding accusatory.

Be inclusive. Inclusion is a very powerful tool when supporting diversity. Talk to your co-workers when you can. Your professional reputation and future success will depend on your ability to accept and embrace the differences of others.

