

# Diversity Challenge: Understanding Cultural Differences and Communication

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*Managing a diverse work group offers many challenges-especially when it comes to communication. As the HIM work force becomes more diverse, managers need to address this issue. The authors offer some strategies for better communication.*

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As many HIM managers already know, facilitating communication in the workplace is a lifelong challenge. Factor in cultural differences, and the challenge increases exponentially.

Communication can break down in the workplace in many ways-between individuals, men and women, young and old, customers and clients, teams and team leaders, managers and employees. Communication between races is a less discussed area. But in today's changing work environment, achieving diversity in the workplace is a business initiative.

Therefore, to be effective managers, HIM professionals must heighten their awareness of cultural differences and learn how to facilitate communication among coworkers, especially in a diverse workgroup. While it should be said that managing communication is only one part of managing a diverse work force, it is an important issue. This article offers some ways to think about the issue and offers some tips for better communication at work.

## The Sound of Silence

The first step in designing solutions to enhance effective communications while valuing cultural differences is to understand how these differences can have a significant impact on the success of a diverse work force.

Take, for example, silence. It is a fact that some cultures are more expressive than others-some are more likely to speak or say "Good morning" than others, and some talk to resolve differences while others keep silent to avoid them. Communications expert and author Dianna Booher notes that the Japanese feel comfortable with silence and discretion, especially with confidential information. They admire people who give careful thought before answering questions or making a point. But for many Americans, silences are unwelcome and unwarranted-something to be covered or concealed. Americans admire fluent speakers who move quickly from idea to idea in an organized manner without pause.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the case for (or against) silence, it can affect communication. Race can make a similar impact. Randall Robinson, a noted African-American author and president of TransAfrica, an organization that fights for policies that aid African countries, has written about a conversation he had with a white man on an airplane flight. The white man initiated the conversation. Robinson states that this was unusual because he almost never utters a word to those flying next to him, sometimes for hours on end-he is silent.

He further reports that he never initiates discussions with white strangers out of a kind of psychic protectionism. "If there were to be an exchange, they will initiate it," he notes. Is Robinson's position true of all African Americans? No. But is it true of some African Americans? Yes. Do some whites take the same position as Robinson, not wanting to be the first to initiate a conversation with an African American? Yes. Is this position true of all white people? No. But through Robinson's example, we see how race does influence communication, for better and for worse. In this case, individual differences are ascribed-whether correctly or not-to racial differences.<sup>2</sup>

The same principle applies in the workplace. At work, silence may often miscommunicate unfounded fear and lack of confidence, especially if the silence is culture driven. Employees from some cultures may be more likely to be silent in

meetings for fear of rejection or criticism. In a diverse work group, some cultures may be fearful or more guarded around the dominant group and therefore may become silent. It is up to the leaders of the department, for the good of the whole and for optimal employee and customer satisfaction, to find creative ways to achieve effective communication among a diverse work group.

### **Creating a Safe Space**

Don't underestimate the power of fear and the ways it can undermine communication. Some individuals fear other ethnic groups, especially when the other is dominant. The success of diversity effectiveness depends, in part, on understanding this fear and working to better understand and minimize the barriers that negatively affect the work group.

For example, we may see "fear of the dominant group" in an all-white group of 10 employees and one African American who may not be at the same job level. We might also see this fear in a setting with a dominant group of African-American men and one white male.

There is fear-fear of confronting another person, of offending someone or hurting their feelings, of being accused of insensitivity or worse. For people to communicate about these sensitive issues, there must be a feeling of safety—a "safe space" where no one will be ridiculed, accused of being insensitive, or suffer repercussions because of what has been said. At the same time, there must be the willingness to speak without anger and listen with an open mind.

Individuals who have difficulty working in groups where the majority of members are from a different ethnic background may be silent and may not give their full participation. In a department staff meeting where the team is a diverse group, the manager may not get answers to questions opened for group discussion because of fear. Some members will not talk, give input, or share their ideas for fear of the dominant group. HIM managers must be creative in using options to eliminate these fears.

A major issue in cultural communication is the inability to honestly discuss differences. This may be exacerbated by a lack of commitment to solving the problems because of a tendency to feel that they will work themselves out, that they are best ignored, or that they will go away if we ignore them.

The first step, then, is to acknowledge the problem, then make a commitment to solving it. This commitment must be made at all management levels and by all individuals. Because of the fears involved, the commitment must be accompanied by courage—the courage to listen, understand, and change.

### **Steps to Improve Communication**

Companies may require an outside diversity consultant to create the "safe space" necessary or may be able to work with their own human resources or other service department. Whatever the method, the time spent addressing and solving diversity issues will not be time wasted.

In going through this process, HIM managers may want to follow these tips, developed by the authors through many years of consulting in this area, to reduce fears and to improve communications:

- if you suspect there is a "fear of the dominant group" issue in your workplace, acknowledge and communicate it to someone who can help you with strategies to overcome it—for example, a diversity consultant or your human resources department
- evaluate the fears. Is there a valid cause for team members to be fearful?
- communicate to your staff, in writing, your commitment to diversity and your diversity goals
- encourage your staff to have open discussions regarding diversity. You may facilitate these discussions or find someone who may be more comfortable doing so. You may need to work to build your own self-confidence to lead and facilitate these discussions
- listen, listen, listen, then paraphrase to validate what you have heard
- don't overlook emotional comments. What may appear irrelevant today may appear tomorrow as an issue
- communicate your agreement before you communicate your disagreement
- create an atmosphere that communicates team spirit. You may use group games (a good source is *The Big Book of Customer Service Training Games*, by Peggy Carlaw and Vasudha Kathleen Deming). Team up by interjecting fun

before the serious stuff

- take the pressure off others when they make mistakes. Smile and share one of your own blunders
- find ways to recognize, encourage, and include each member of your work group. Recognition may include team member's talent, contribution, or participation

### **A Better Workplace for a Better Profession**

As HIM professionals, we face many challenges. Not least among these challenges is retaining members of our profession and bringing in new ones. If we are to become a diverse profession, we will need to become more adept in communicating with and managing a diverse work force.

Understanding communication and cultural differences, then, will not only benefit us in our individual workplaces, but will help the profession as a whole as well. Learning to resolve our differences is the first step.

### **Notes**

1. Booher, Dianna. *Communicate with Confidence*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. and RR Donnelley & Sons Company, 1994.
2. Robinson, Randall. *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 2000.

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### ***10 Ways to promote effective communications in a diverse work group***

Based on more than 25 years of experience in HIM as a consultant, director, manager, and educator, plus extensive research in diversity, Gerri Smothers offers these tips to help in workplace diversity situations:

1. **Explain acronyms** prior to using them. An individual's socioeconomic status or job status may limit his or her knowledge of acronyms, even if you know them.
2. **Use idioms sparingly**. Many idioms are used as metaphors to make an idea or a point more vivid- however, they may not be universally understood by all ethnic groups and may be insulting.
3. **Expect employees not to use slang in the workplace**. Note: Slang is multicultural. Each group has its own words.
4. **Ask individuals to speak more slowly** if it will help others better understand what they are saying.
5. **Identify your motives** for criticizing employees and choose your words carefully. Criticize the behavior, not the person. The key is to criticize without crippling.
6. If you find it necessary to correct an employee's grammar, **do it privately and kindly**.
7. **Use friendly tones** when talking to all ethnic groups; don't talk down to anyone.
8. **Pay attention to your body language**. Respect others' personal space and keep an appropriate distance, e.g., a social distance of four to 12 feet.
9. **Listen** for what is not being said, especially in staff meetings.
10. **Encourage and invite** people to talk in group settings. The results may surprise you.

### ***A Diversity Reading List***

- "Valuing Diversity: A Strategic Approach for HR Leaders." Seminar presented at Michigan State University, 2000.

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