



Embracing cultural diversity at work

10. Bystander behaviour in organisations

Jasmine is feeling more and more uncomfortable when she walks into the tearoom. Several times recently she's interrupted conversations in which articles of women's clothing worn in other cultures are being derided. It is clearly inappropriate. There are a couple of senior managers involved in the conversations. As a relatively junior staff member, she just isn't sure what to do about it.

There are women from these cultures in their workplace. She is distressed to imagine how humiliating it would be for them if they were the ones walking into the tearoom. She raises it with her team leader, John, who then raises the concern with the senior leaders concerned. They claim to be "just joking" and see it as "harmless fun". John disagrees with them, and calls them out for their inappropriate behaviour and puts specific counselling in place for the individuals involved.

Why supporting others matters

Everyone in every conversation can make a contribution to supporting others. You can notice when others don't get a turn, when they are talked over, when they don't feel safe, or are confused because they don't understand the "unwritten rules".

The role of team leaders is particularly important. It was David Morrison as Lieutenant General of the Australian Army who popularised the saying "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept". Team leaders should pay attention to the tone they set. People who make insulting comments, whether it is called a joke or not, or behave in more overtly discriminatory ways are sometimes testing the waters for what's acceptable. Let it go by once, and that gives permission to repeat these behaviours and for others to join in.

It can be threatening for people who feel excluded to speak up about their experience, or their different needs. They may be reluctant or not know how to take action. With allies around you, it's easier to speak up. Allies notice when someone's anxious or upset, and ask why. It's much easier for someone who feels annoyed, threatened or unsafe to reach out to an ally.

Embracing cultural diversity at work

Being an ally means that you are proactive in your support, and you call injustice out when you see it. By being an ally, you reduce bias. You show people that support counts. You show people that it's safe to speak up about concerns and questions about identity and opportunity. You make inclusion matter.

Possible actions

1. When you notice that others are treated unfairly, act. Even if it doesn't feel like it's your place to do anything, do something anyway.
2. Foster strong peer support networks so there's someone that everyone can go to if they need to.
3. Depending on the severity of what you see, try these actions:
 - Leave a pointed silence or give a disapproving look.
 - Make a lighthearted comment to try to stop the situation.
 - Check in with the person who is the subject of the behaviour that concerns you. "That was so wrong of x to do y to you. Are you OK? What can I do to help?"

- Calmly disagree and state what is wrong or unacceptable about what you have just seen or heard. Explain why it's important to stop the behaviour. "You might have thought it was a joke, but I think it's offensive/divisive."
- If the behaviour seems to contravene your organisation's policies for unacceptable behaviour or discrimination, seek guidance. Report details as accurately as you can.

Key messages

1. Actions that discriminate against others' cultures can sometimes be made to look harmless, when in reality they are not.
2. Whether an individual is from a particular cultural group or not, they can still feel harassed by the behaviour.
3. Calling out these actions is important because what we accept is what we endorse.
4. Standing up to this behaviour can include subtle hints through to formal action.



16 – 27 March 2020

Register now at tasteofharmony.org.au