



Embracing cultural diversity at work

8. Nurturing a learning culture

Jacky has noticed that in team meetings Abad, who joined the team a few months ago, rarely contributes. His contributions seem not to be heard when he does. He's actually their expert in a key area, yet his opinion is rarely sought. When he speaks, he's more likely than anyone else to be spoken over, and once he's finished, the conversation moves to a new topic. Jacky has noticed, somewhat uncomfortably, that the team tends to discuss matters that are in Abad's area without bothering to ask for his input.

Jacky is frustrated by this pattern. It's not clear whether Abad wants to contribute or not. Jacky approaches him outside of the team meeting to discuss options for a new project. She's excited after their conversation. Abad has an amazing idea on the spot that would halve the time it took to complete the first phase of this new project.

Jacky asks Abad how he finds the team meetings. He admits they're challenging to him. It feels a bit hostile and he's not used to that. She asks him how she can help him to be more comfortable in team meetings and also contribute his great ideas more often? She is also concerned that he may feel that he is being discriminated against or even harassed. They have a warm discussion about better options for participating in the team meeting.

Why asking more questions matters

It's disempowering to feel left out, and potentially discriminatory. People from different cultures can use a lot of energy trying to read group dynamics. On the other hand, it's very empowering when people take the time to find out about your experiences and to discover ways for you to contribute at your best.

By being curious and asking questions we find out more about others, and deepen our understanding. This takes empathy to the next stage. Make the conversation rewarding, as Jacky did, rather than confrontational. Then we increase the chance of future conversations about differences and how to work together.

Possible actions

1. Ask questions when you don't understand what's happening: "I'd like to know more about..."
2. Ask follow-up questions. These are powerful, it shows you have listened to the person, and that you care enough to ask for more information from them.
3. Preface what you say by noting your unfamiliarity with the subject.
4. Avoid jumping into conversations just to assert your view. Ask others for their views instead. "How do you see this?", "What is your experience?"
5. Arrange informal get-togethers where people can come together to ask questions about each other's backgrounds.

Key messages

1. Approaching conflict with the intention of questioning "why" helps avoid jumping to conclusions.
2. Be aware that some behaviours may be discriminatory and may require counselling, team training or stronger management policies and procedures.
3. Effective questioning is about seeing the issue from many different angles.
4. A deeper understanding of an issue can lead to more effective solutions.



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