



Embracing cultural diversity at work

2. Inclusion not exclusion

Management at an aged care nursing home posted a sign in the staff tea-room instructing all team members to speak in English only in both resident and staff areas of the facility. This was in response to English-speaking staff feeling threatened when a group of workers were having conversations over lunch in their own language.

Management feels that it would be more inclusive for everyone to speak English at all times within the facility. There would be no 'secrets' and this would help everyone to get along.

Instead, multilingual team members chose to meet surreptitiously to speak in their own language to organise family logistics such as school pickups, purchase of grocery items and social engagements. This damaged trust amongst the team.

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Management on hearing rumours of discontent chose to reinforce that only English would be allowed at the facility. This resulted in multilingual team members feeling increasingly marginalised and undervalued.

Individuals perform best when they feel valued and know that their concerns are heard and recognised as valid. In a positive and supportive environment, team members will speak and behave openly. When employees are not encouraged to be open and honest, they may hide behaviours, which breeds resentment and destroys trust and commitment.

Inclusive approaches

What would have been a better way to approach this situation? Encourage an organisational environment that is clear, open and responsive by setting clear expectations. At team meetings, outline why it's an advantage for people to be open and to speak up. Discuss the value of everyone sharing their issues and concerns as well as their praise and recognition.

A team charter or 'Our Team Rules' can be a valuable way to hold everyone, including management, accountable to things like honesty, respect for others' opinions and being open to all questions.

Create an agenda that schedules in time for regular meetings to share concerns. Always commit to agreed actions, and don't forget to acknowledge successes.

Alternative outcome

Management brings the issue to the team meeting, where everyone's concerns are shared. Some feel that their identity is being disregarded, others feel the team is divided based on language and others recognise that the level of trust between them is being affected.

A solution is agreed:

- Everybody recognises how important speaking English well is to their roles. It is essential for occupational health and safety and for resident interactions as well as medication supervision and general member-to-member communications.
- Multilingual team members agree that only speaking in English at work is important but also agree that there are a couple of exceptions:
 - » In the staff room.
 - » On the phone if speaking to family or friends.
- To encourage mutual understanding, it is agreed that a 'word a week' will be posted in a foreign language with its English translation on the staff room wall.
- The business will organise an event like A Taste of Harmony once a year, where everyone can share food and an introduction to the different cultures of the team and management.

Key messages

1. Conflicting interests in workplaces that have different cultures can occur.
2. Allowing all parties to discuss their truth is necessary when deciding on a course of action.
3. Employers should always keep an eye on the necessity for targeted intervention such as counselling, warnings or even dismissal.
4. Demanding certain behaviours in staff-only locations may be discriminatory if any group feels disadvantaged as a result so management care and attention is essential.