



Embracing cultural diversity at work

6. Dealing with bias?

At a financial services firm, Sunny attends a networking event. The event is to bring together employees from different cultural and work groups. When she arrives, there are others already there, talking together. She walks up to introduce herself. Rather than parting the circle, making room for her to move into it as she had expected, they continue their conversation. Sunny does not speak up but instead falls back to a position near the corner of the room.

From Sunny's perspective this experience is alienating and discriminatory. She feels unwelcome and the intentionality of the lack of engagement reinforces the view that she has no hope of a career at this organisation. The chances of rising through the hierarchy seems unlikely.

Sunny shares her experience with her senior manager who is unimpressed by the behaviour. The senior manager takes a step that might provide some reassurance and options:

She approaches a senior partner in the firm and recruits them to be a mentor to Sunny. This serves two purposes. It raises the problematic behaviour with someone who can send a message to more junior staff and it provides Sunny with some support in navigating the organisation.

She also decides to keep track of the individuals involved, in case counselling is required.

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Navigating biases

1. Our own cultural assumptions affect who we make eye contact with, whether we smile or frown, whether or not we start a conversation with someone. Being attuned to differences and open to noticing how people respond to or initiate nonverbal gestures will help.
2. Biases mean that we don't pay as much attention, or even notice, people who are different from us. We don't listen to what they say with the same attention we pay to people like us. With these actions we render them invisible. If you want to be better at noticing bias and to be fairer, there are small cues to watch for.
3. Non-verbal behaviours, which are important social signals, vary from culture to culture. Here are some examples:
4. Eye contact, including whether or not eye contact is made and how long it is held.
5. Touch, including whether or not people shake hands or kiss someone in greeting.
6. Gestures, including different hand signals.
7. Physical space, including how much personal space is left between people.
8. Facial expressions, such as winking, smiling or frowning.
9. Posture, such as standing with hands on hips.
10. Paralanguage, which includes speech factors such as accent, pitch and volume.
11. For example, you might perceive a frown by someone like you as an expression of thoughtfulness. Yet with someone else, you perceive it as criticism. You might attempt to shake hands as a greeting, but notice that someone from a different culture doesn't respond to your outstretched hand. You might feel offended, yet so might they!
12. People from all cultures can be hyper-aware of differences. They might be subtle but can have significant impact.

Key messages

1. Watch carefully for signs that people are being treated differently because of their culture.
2. Learn more about the customs of cultures of the people in your team. Ask your employees about their culture.
3. Individuals from the same culture may also vary in their behaviours and what they find offensive or friendly.
4. Collect some data on your own interactions. Who do you spend the most time with? Whose advice do you seek? Who is not included in meetings, and why?
5. Review existing internal policies and complaints handling processes to ensure they are in place, up to date and understood.