



Embracing cultural diversity at work

7. Building connections and trust

As the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander member of her team, Robyn is often asked to explain "her culture" to others. She welcomes these opportunities because it is a good opportunity to provide answers to questions that might not otherwise have been asked and it is positive to know that others are interested in her heritage and traditions.

People also ask her about racism and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Over time though, she finds it harder to have the informal role of spokesperson. Partly because she feels that she can't speak for all First Peoples, it's not one culture. And partly because it's exhausting to speak about racism and its effects. She is constantly reminded of being "other".

Robyn's colleague is aware of her generosity in sharing her knowledge and experience but is also cognisant of the demands on Robyn. Together they approach their manager to suggest that perhaps once a year they celebrate all cultures represented on the team, share their experiences and answer questions.

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Immediately, the manager checks whether Robyn is offended by the questions or whether they are unwelcome. If this is the case, then they need to be stopped more assertively and in a manner that Robyn will be comfortable. On the other hand, if they are relatively benign at this point in time, they should still be assessed periodically, and Robyn needs to be assured of a pathway for communicating any change.

How to build better connections

1. Accept that the world is not fair. Demographic differences mean that people are treated differently. Believing the world is fair to all means that you under-recognise or just don't notice the impact of acts that are unfair. Recognising this enables you to have greater empathy for others.
2. Access your empathy. What if it were you? What would it be like for you to be "other"? What actions would you want others to take? What support would you want?
3. Share the load when you can. Think of the work of inclusion as like a flock of geese, where the lead bird changes regularly. The whole flock takes turns, so that everyone faces into the headwinds from time to time, and everyone has a chance to rest in the slipstream.
4. The more we interact with and get to know people, the less we "otherise" them. Look at your network and who you interact with. How might you increase its diversity?
5. Before you act, check yourself – whose interests are being served? Yours, or theirs? Make sure you have empathised with others' needs.

Key messages

6. There's a fine line between trying to find out more about people from different cultural groups and regularly reinforcing their "otherness".
7. The key to respectful communication is empathy, think carefully about how you would feel before you take any action or ask a question.
8. Formal programs that allow all groups to share more about themselves are a great starting point for building mutual understanding.