



Welcoming Diversity in the Workplace

If you look around at your coworkers, you may notice more people of color than you did a few years ago. By the year 2000, studies predict, over half of the U.S. labor force will be minorities.

As the workforce changes, workers may see differences in race or ethnicity in terms of "us" and "them." Treating "them" with suspicion can result in tension and a loss of productivity. You can overcome such barriers by making an effort to know the people you work with.

The Opportunity of Diversity

Racial and cultural diversity can lead to the discovery of life's variety and universality.

While the basic needs and goals of all people are remarkably similar, the ways they express those needs and goals can be very different. Language, actions and gestures can mean different things in different cultures. For example, in some cultures, eye contact is considered insulting and aggressive, while in others, *avoiding* eye contact may signal that you are being dishonest and evasive. Try to be aware of such misunderstandings and don't be afraid to apologize if

you inadvertently offend someone. If someone offends you, consider that it may not have been intentional.

Communication Is the Bridge

It's almost impossible to ignore some differences, such as race. When two people meet for the first time, their obvious differences may dominate their perceptions of each other, whether they acknowledge them or not. Once they learn more about each other, the differences usually fade to the background, and the people part more aware of their similarities.

Thus, the members of a diverse workforce can get along better with each other if they observe some basic rules of communication:

- No reference to a person's cultural, ethnic or racial background or sexual orientation need be made.
- Ignore personal behavior when addressing a coworker, unless it happens to be work-related. When it is your job to talk about a coworker's work, do so directly to the worker or not at all, and not to other employees. Make sure feedback is relevant, precise, fair and constructive.

- Be an "active" listener, paying attention to others, not talking while they're talking, repeating back to them what they say to make sure you got it right, and responding to what they *say*, not to who they *are*.
- Avoid off-color language, offensive jokes or allusions and imitative behavior which makes fun of others.

Fitting In

Under the surface, people really do have a lot in common. We all want to be judged as individuals, not on the basis of some label. Treat others as you want to be treated and respect your coworkers' differences.

Respecting diversity means giving people a chance to "fit in." For instance, inviting others to join you at lunch can help all of you to overcome mutual fears and anxieties and to work together in a productive way.

Many companies are becoming more and more diverse in their workforces, so chances are good that you will have many opportunities to welcome coworkers with varied backgrounds.