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Communicating Across Cultures

Abstract
[Excerpt] Communication is the key to so many things a steward does, and good communication skills are something experienced stewards develop. But even experienced stewards have special challenges when the communication is between people of different cultures.

Keywords
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Communicating Across Cultures

Communication is the key to so many things a steward does, and good communication skills are something experienced stewards develop. But even experienced stewards have special challenges when the communication is between people of different cultures. (By "culture" we mean common experiences, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, acting and communicating.)

Chances are your workplace has gotten more diverse in recent years. Whether you're working around people from many parts of the globe or just different parts of the country, or in some cases maybe even just your city, you are likely to find that there are different cultures among your co-workers.

When people from different cultures try to communicate sometimes there are misunderstandings or, worse, hard feelings. If you find that you are not connecting with all your members, especially those who are different from you, these tips on cross cultural communications may be of help.

To avoid misunderstandings, learn the various customs your co-workers may have in personal exchanges

Learn About Different Cultures and Values

The first thing you may want to do is learn about the different cultures in your workplace. This can be done by reading, surfing the internet or simply asking your co-workers about themselves.

You may learn some interesting, fascinating and very helpful things. For example, people from Russia or other former Communist countries are often suspicious of unions based on the role unions played in their former homes. On the other hand, people from the West Indies might be impatient with the union because in their home countries unions have more rights and support.

To avoid misunderstandings, learn the various customs your co-workers may have in personal exchanges like shaking hands, making eye contact and speaking out in groups.

One caution: Knowing about a culture is just a guide that might help you understand and relate to someone from that culture. Do not look for a "roadmap" for relating to everyone from a particular culture. Everyone's different, and someone with a background in a certain culture may not display all or even any of the aspects of that culture. Beware of stereotypes.

Take Time, Listen, Paraphrase

Good listening is always vital, but it is especially important when communicating with someone from a different culture. Let the person finish his or her thoughts. Do not form any conclusions until you are sure you really understand what was said and done. Relax, be flexible, and be open to the possibility that your co-worker is using words in ways different from the way you do.

Be prepared to respectfully ask for clarification or further explanation. For example: "I want to make sure I understand what you are saying. You said the supervisor wasn't polite. Can you give me an example?"

A good skill to use is paraphrasing. This is when you repeat back to a person what you think you heard him or her say. For example: "What I hear you saying is the supervisor raised his voice to you and used swear words, is that right?"

Work on Your Delivery

When talking, be aware of how you might sound to someone who is not familiar with certain words, gestures and tones. Avoid slang, jargon or initials that everyone may not understand. Also remember that sarcasm and many jokes don't translate well across cultures, and adjust your delivery accordingly.

Take your time and look for cues as to whether your listeners are understanding what you're saying, or if they are confused or offended. Perhaps your hand gestures make them uncomfortable or give a message that you didn't intend. Maybe they don't know what the labor board is and aren't comfortable enough to ask. Perhaps you used a common expression without realizing that it has negative racial, ethnic or sexual overtones.

Try to create a comfortable atmosphere and ask for feedback to see what your listeners are getting from your delivery. Do not just ask if they understand, because many people will say yes even if they really do not. Ask open-ended questions about the content of your message. For example: "What has been your experience with the new rule we have been discussing?"

Develop Empathy

Understand and appreciate the world view of others. Don't assume that the way you see or do things is "normal" and they are the odd ones. Respect and learn from the differences.

And, finally, a twist on the golden rule. What you find acceptable may not be appropriate for everyone. For example: In a class I taught for members of a health care union I found that many people were calling each other, "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Ms.," while I much preferred to have people use my first name. In that case my golden rule was "treat others as they want to be treated."

— Ken Margolies: The writer is on the labor education faculty at Cornell University.