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Bridging Cultural Differences

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Bridging Cultural Differences

Abstract
[Excerpt] How you say it can matter as much as what you say.

Keywords
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Comments

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Bridging Cultural Differences

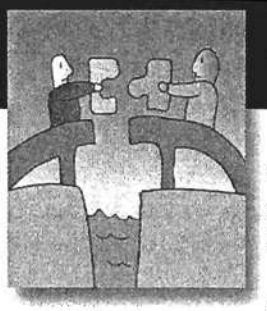
At a union convention some years ago two delegates from New York arrived at an available pay phone at the same time. Both were desperate to make a call. After some harsh words were exchanged one of the delegates kept the phone and the other walked away to look for another one. A delegate from Texas who observed this exchange remarked aloud: "If two Texans had talked to each other like that someone would be dead now."

I laughed and said that New Yorkers were more willing to tolerate frankness (some would say rudeness) and conflict without taking it personally.

This is just one example of how different cultures deal with issues like conflict.

There are other areas where cultures often differ, and knowing about them will help stewards in their dealings with members and management from different parts of the country or the world and who have grown up in cultures different from your own. Among those area are:

How you say it can matter as much as what you say.



Directness

When I was in Mexico for an extended period of time I learned that it was quite rude to ask a stranger a question (like how to find the bus station) without taking some time and first saying "buenos dias." Going back to the way it is in New York, most strangers would appreciate you not taking more of their time than necessary by getting right to your question without small talk.

Likewise, people differ in how they feel about how near another person should get when talking to them. One person's attempt at showing friendship and trust by huddling close to others may cause them to feel their personal space is being invaded.

While these kinds of things may seem trivial, they could make getting the facts of a grievance or getting a settlement with management more difficult if the person you are dealing with feels insulted or "invaded."

Getting and Valuing Information

Some people are "facts and figures" kinds of people. When faced with an issue they go on the Internet to find statistics and suggested solutions. Others put more importance on getting a "feel" for the issue and ways to approach the issue and may want to talk to others who have experience dealing with similar situations. Both kinds of information need to be considered for good problem solving and decision making, but people working together on a problem may butt heads over this unless they are considerate and respectful of the other's style and find room for both approaches.

Concepts of Time

Have you ever noticed that not everyone means the same thing when they say, "that *never* happens" or "I'll be there *soon*," or "yes, that happens *sometimes*." In an exercise we do in classes, students rate on a numerical scale what they mean by words like *never*; *soon* and *sometimes*. What we find is that when some people say "it never happens," what they mean is it happens zero times. Meanwhile, others in the same class might say "it never happens," but what they mean is that it happens 30 percent of the time.

The wide range of meanings people have for words like these demonstrates that we have to be more precise and ask for clarification and definitions. Imagine trying to process a grievance when all the grievant tells you — and therefore all you can tell management about the case — are statements full of ambiguous words like those mentioned above. You have to find out more specifically what people mean by the words they use.

Working on Tasks with Others

Some people want to get right to work on a task and figure they will get to know others as they work together. Others may only be comfortable starting on the task after some time has been spent getting to know the others they will be working with. What kinds of conflicts and misunderstandings do you think are likely to happen if these two types try to work together without, at the first sign that something is wrong, discussing their different styles and reaching an understanding on how to proceed?

Revealing Feelings and Opinions

Some people are readily willing to share their feelings or opinions with others, even those they just met. Others are more reserved and only reveal this more slowly and after they trust the person they are telling.

This could be a real problem in an investigation if you are asking lots of specific questions and the member is reluctant to tell you everything right away. In cases like that you need to be aware that you may have to build your relationship with the member and raise his or her comfort level before you can get the real story.

Likewise, if you are trying to make a decision and some people are freely giving their opinions while others are remaining silent, don't assume you know what the silence means. You need to create an atmosphere where everyone is comfortable sharing their feelings and thoughts.

It's not realistic to think you can bridge all cultural gaps effortlessly just by reading a few helpful tips. Doing so takes time, good listening and awareness skills and lots of practice.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the Labor Extension faculty of Cornell University.