

> WORKING WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

However capable potential employees may be in the technical aspect of their jobs, their effectiveness as workers is largely based on their ability to apply for employment, to succeed in an interview, and to be retained in the workplace in the Canadian way. Those who culturally integrate are most successful.

- 10 -

A bridge is a good metaphor for workplace cultural adaptation. Initially, the employer is at one end of the bridge spanning the cultural differences and the new Canadian is at the other end. The ideal bridging process has both parties meeting somewhere on the bridge. Most commonly, however, the new Canadian is crossing

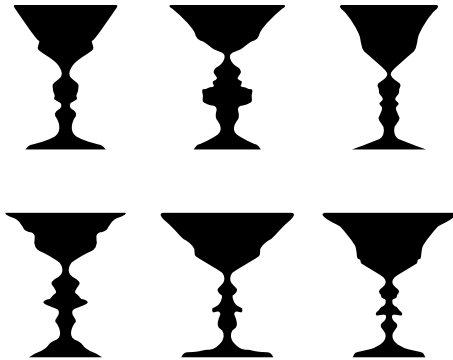
to the workplace solo. He or she is expected to assimilate the existing workplace norms.

Recognition of several (of the many) cultural elements of this bridging process can greatly facilitate your experience with new Canadian employees and their experiences with you.



PERCEPTION

You may see goblets or silhouettes in this perceptual exercise of Zeke Berman entitled “Faces or Vases”.



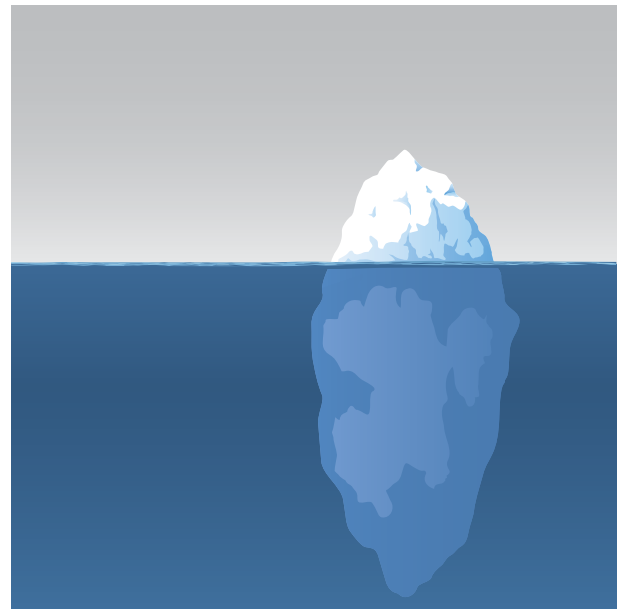
After a few seconds, most people can see both, but sometimes only with assistance from others. Similarly, employers and New Canadian employees begin effective communication by recognizing the existence of additional cultural realities. We all see the same things... but we see them differently!! Most of us need assistance in this perceptual shifting process and a body of cross-cultural research suggests that the ability to see situations from another person's perspective is a (or the) key factor in communicating effectively across cultures.

Most conflicts in multicultural workplaces are the result of differing cultural perceptions of the same event/situation. The need to create a successful multicultural workplace moves far beyond

acknowledging the “do's and taboos” of other cultures into the arena of understanding the underlying values, attitudes and beliefs of the cultures with which we interact.

While it's unrealistic to expect that any individual can fully understand all these underlying elements, every individual can learn to acknowledge that these cultural differences exist and to respect them. I may understand that I should not show the sole of my foot in some cultures; however, if I do not understand that there is a cultural context to this behaviour and do not respect the fact that it has meaning to members of that cultural group, I have failed to see anything deeper than the tip of the cultural iceberg.

- 11 -



SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT DIVERSE WORKPLACES:

- A cultivation of different viewpoints
- An understanding of different cultural norms and their impact on communication, problem solving, and conflict.
- A set of shared values that clearly articulate demonstrations of dignity and respect.

1.

KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES

Make it your business to learn about the deeper than visible elements of the cultures of those you are hiring. You might consider finding a “cultural informant” (a consultant or colleague who can help you understand a specific culture’s values, norms, perceptions, and more.)

Perhaps you have begun to hire immigrants who practice a spiritual faith that is unfamiliar to you. An excellent strategy for understanding is to have some of these individuals, or “cultural informants”, briefly discuss their faith with you and how they put it into practice. This discussion could focus on which aspects of practicing their faith specifically impact the workplace.

DID YOU KNOW?

Workplaces that are successful in hiring and retaining multi-cultural staff provide on-going education to all staff about cultural elements (norms, values, style of communication, approach to conflict, etc.). Contact the Job Match Network (see Resources section) to identify cultural informants within local immigrant service agencies to help you.

2.

COMMUNICATION STYLE

We discussed the importance of language fluency earlier in this guide, but Communication Style is *how we have conversations*. This includes small talk (not all cultures discuss weather and hockey in casual conversation!). Learning to engage in appropriate small talk discussions is often a struggle for new Canadians.

Communication style also includes: direct and indirect communication, linear and circular discussion, etc. Below is a brief dialogue between direct and indirect communicators. We can see how quickly different perceptions of each other’s style lead these individuals to misunderstanding.

CASE STUDY - WORKING LATE

Mr. Jones: It looks like we’re going to have to put in some more time on this part of the project.

Mr. Nu: I see.

Mr. Jones: Can you stay late tomorrow so we can finish it?

Mr. Nu: Yes, I think so.

Mr. Jones: That would be a great help.

Mr. Nu: Yes, tomorrow’s a special day, did you know?

Mr. Jones: How do you mean?

Mr. Nu: It’s my son’s birthday.

Mr. Jones: How nice! I hope you enjoy it very much.

Mr. Nu: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

From this case study we can see that Mr. Jones is a direct communicator and Mr. Nu is more indirect. As communicators, we usually expect (wish for) the recipient to utilize our style. We may not be able to encode the message stored in the words of someone from a different style.

So, when Mr. Nu answers Mr. Jones' question "Can you stay late tomorrow?" with "Yes, I think so.", Mr. Jones hears only the "yes" and not the rest of the sentence. An indirect communicator uses a variety of qualifiers (i.e., I hope to, I'd like to, I plan to, etc.) when they have difficulty directly stating 'no' which is often seen as extremely rude in indirect cultures. Of course, in indirect cultures, the listener could probably encode the qualifier and see the speaker's intended meaning.

Mr. Nu leaves this dialogue believing that Mr. Jones has understood the importance of his son's birthday and thus given him the time off. Mr. Jones believes that Mr. Nu has indicated that 'yes' he can stay late tomorrow and may be disappointed or angry when Mr. Nu does not show up. Both parties could benefit from understanding each other's perception and communication style!

3.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

We know that non-verbal communication accounts for somewhere between 75-90% of our message. By definition, non-verbal communication conveys information beyond the words of a message. It can include information conveyed by things like:

- eye contact
- use of time
- appearance/demeanor/posture
- facial expressions
- laughter
- tone of voice
- conversational distance
- scent
- grooming and dress
- use of silence
- gestures

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Work towards awareness and articulation of your own culture's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

- Identify your own learned generalizations, stereotypes and filters.
- Clarify your comprehension of cultural messages or use "cultural informants" when needed
- Listen, observe and describe rather than evaluate.
- Recognize that initial perceptions are often inaccurate and allow for additional interpretations of a situation to arise.
- Work towards developing empathy. Try to see a situation from your own and your employee's cultural perspective.
- Check assumptions. Don't assume another culture is similar to yours.

The goal in acknowledging non-verbal communication as a key component of a message is not only awareness of meanings other than our own (around eye contact for example) but determining how and when to work towards suggesting modification that would make communication more effective in your particular workplace. For example, if an employee does not engage in Canadian-style eye contact but is required to make presentations as part of his/her job, you may need to address the employee's different non-verbal style and the importance of eye contact in presentations in Canadian culture. If the employee recognizes that effectiveness of communication is enhanced, he or she can often make the adjustment.

It can be helpful to examine your own perceptions around various non-verbal messages. For example, in many western cultures, prolonged silence is a source of discomfort and often signifies a failure to communicate, that one is in disagreement, or possibly angry or annoyed.

Silence can also be an active form of communication. Silence often designates thought, or shows one is giving consideration to a comment. It can indicate a second language learner is determining how to use English or French appropriately. It can also mean one is hesitant to say "yes" or is not completely happy with a suggestion.

Effective multicultural workplaces are aware of the power of non-verbal messages and are continuously verifying perceptions to make sure communication is accurate. Clarify! For example, if you have an employee who engages in long periods of silence in dialogue, you might ask "I notice that you wait longer than I would when responding to questions. I am wondering what is occurring in that silence?"

4.

ORIENTATION AND MENTORING

Many of the cultural ideas in this chapter can be addressed during:

- **ORIENTATION TO THE WORKPLACE:** Conducted at the beginning of a new hire's employment, Orientation is designed to set expectations and clarify workplace policies and procedures. Orientation for new Canadians should include more specific behaviours than might be appropriate when we all share a similar cultural background. Using the metaphor of the Iceberg mentioned earlier in this document, it is usually the values and behaviours that are below the water line that are most important to clarify for a newcomer.
- **MENTORING:** Both formal and informal mentoring within the workplace are effective integration and promotion strategies for new immigrants. An on-the-job mentor is a knowledgeable and experienced employee in the organization who agrees to coach the newcomer. Mentoring allows employees to learn the intangibles that are needed to succeed in the workplace. New immigrants especially can benefit from a mentoring relationship, because they need to learn about the Canadian workplace as well as your specific company.

These two elements are key components in all workplaces that have effective multicultural working teams. We'll explore these elements further in the next section.