



Diversity! in the workplace

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Diversity of Outlook

There are times when diversity is quickly apparent through outward appearances. Cultural dress or handicap equipment can reveal of diversity 'in the blink of an eye". At other times you'll be surprised to notice someone's hearing aid or a cane leaning behind a desk, if you notice at all. A limitation may glimpsed occasionally only through a MedicAlert bracelet where privacy rules and anything from an allergy to a more serious medical condition is possible.

And when we move past the first impressions our visual cues provide, how well do we listen to the content and context of what people say to understand what they really mean? It's often an uphill battle as our attention spans get shorter and our "sound bite society" takes over. (If you want to see sound bites powered up, take a quick peek at just how well entertainment and celebrity television keeps our wandering attention well focused). In the process we have become demanding consumers. If we do not get the information we want after about 2 minutes listening, we tend to tune out. Distill that message down to a concise one minute and you may still have my attention.

No wonder communication is frustrating. Not only can language, accents and speech patterns distract us, even the length of time people talk is an obstacle to conveying the message. And of course the more we want to be heard, the more we talk, and the less likely we are to get to the point. That's, of course, assuming you have my full attention in the first place, and that's unlikely given the details, deadlines and urgent agendas running through my own mind.

Then there is the matter of staying attuned to the message when you are hearing it delivered through cultural viewpoints that differ from your own. I may absolutely not see the situation in your terms, in fact your interpretation may stray far from what I consider to be the facts, but can I stay with you and be open to your thought processes? Can I search hard and find some points of common ground for discussion? Is there a way for me to overcome my own reactions and hear between the lines to understand what you mean, as well as what you are saying?

One way to start improving communication on the job is through simple management-by-walking-around. Staff leader visibility creates opportunities for informal exchanges with employees about the work they do by soliciting input, encouraging effort and acknowledging results. Another is to open up staff meetings by enabling team members to ask more questions. Meetings are also a great time to create exchanges of ideas and viewpoints between people who might not usually interact. Setting aside a regular meeting segment review pre-submitted ideas may help the team to understand and appreciate how their colleagues think and view the work, the

customers and the company.

All things considered, it sounds like there could be some interesting and diverse discussions ahead.

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