

# Connecting Banks and Communities Through Cultural Agility

## Workshop Facilitation & Discussion Guide

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# Examples of Work-Based Cultural Conflicts

## Cross-Cultural Communication

- a) Culturally diverse employees may not ask for help or clarification when they don't understand. In some cultures, asking for clarification is avoided because it is considered impolite, especially when talking to a supervisor or elder.
- b) Apparent displays of understanding (head nodding) may mean, "I hear you" not "I understand you." Among many limited English speakers, respect for authority, fear or the inability to express the need for clarification results in a show of understanding, when, in fact, the employee does not understand.

## New Employee Orientations

- a) New employee orientations are frequently overwhelming for native English speakers because of the large amount of important information that is conveyed. Imagine then, how confusing these sessions can be for limited English speakers.
- b) Limited English fluency exaggerates the gaps in understanding for culturally diverse employees. These employees are often reluctant to "bother" co-workers or "offend" managers during the first week of work by asking for information a second time.
- c) Misunderstandings stemming from new employee orientations can result in poor job performance, safety concerns and a lack of workplace cohesion.

## Evaluations

- a) Other societies often have different systems of evaluating employees, and some have none at all. In many countries evaluations are not an opportunity for dialogue. Supervisors give instructions that usually are not challenged or even discussed.
- b) Where employers have not taken the time to fully explain the nature and purpose of the evaluation to an employee, substantial misunderstandings can result.

- c) American “directness” or “frankness” in addressing perceived problems with an employee’s work performance can be perceived as personal criticism or threatening, especially by people from cultures more reserved or subtle than ours.
- d) American values, expectations and cultural norms can frequently cloud evaluations for culturally diverse employees. Requiring employees to be a “go-getter” or criticizing employees for being “passive” can be unfair to individuals who come from cultures where individual decision-making is rare or where individuals are encouraged to put the needs of others ahead of themselves.
- e) Confusion about roles and expectations can create misunderstandings. For example requesting that culturally diverse employees “decide for themselves” may result in blank stares where employees have traditionally viewed the supervisor’s role as making decisions and their role as executing them.

### **Age: Authority Figures and Hierarchy**

- a) Many cultures have rules and strict standards for approaching a superior or interacting with an elder. However, elders may feel displaced and discounted in American culture which values, youth, innovation and “the latest information.” This may especially be the case where younger members of the same cultural community receive promotions due to their faster rate of language acquisition and assimilation.
- b) Some culturally diverse employees may refuse a promotion if it would place them in a position of authority over an elder - even if the senior employee were an American. Women from cultures with highly defined gender roles and identities may be particularly reluctant to assume positions of authority over men.
- c) American managers or supervisors who are younger than some of their culturally diverse employees should be careful that overly familiar or “friendly” behavior is not interpreted as a lack of respect.

## **Body Language and Personal Space**

- a) Body language considered appropriate by Americans may be inappropriate or be offensive to people from other cultures. For example, using a crooked finger to summon an employee may be appropriate to Americans but utterly impolite and rude to Africans, Asians and Latinos for whom it could suggest a way to call a dog. Similarly, an offered handshake from an American man may be offensive to Muslim women because it would violate established gender norms of sexual modesty.
- b) A culturally diverse employee may look away from a supervisor because in some Asian countries it is disrespectful to look superiors in the eye. Culturally diverse women may avoid eye contact with men because they were taught that establishing eye contact is immodest, impolite and unacceptable.
- c) Norms regarding personal space vary from country to country. Americans typically stand between 12 to 15 inches apart. Members of Asian cultures may stand further away while members of Latin or Middle Eastern cultures may stand closer than Americans are accustomed to. As always, one should not assume that a given employee has adopted or adheres to a given culture.

## **Dress and Personal Hygiene**

- a) Dress and personal attire means different things in different things in different cultures. In America, dress is often a reflection of personal taste or fashion trends. In many other cultures, dress reflects status, wealth, religious beliefs, gender roles and traditional sensibilities.
- b) For example, many Muslim women cover their heads and also wear loose fitting clothing that does not describe the shape of their bodies. This practice, called Hijab, meaning, “to hide from view”, refers both to the custom and to the head covering itself. The purpose of this type of dress is to display their Muslim identity with a dignified sense of modesty that does not draw attention from men.
- c) Employees from different cultural backgrounds may not share the same personal hygiene standards. While employers may establish standards of personal hygiene and cleanliness, these standards should be sensitively communicated to culturally diverse employees.

## **Gender Issues**

- a) American cultural norms encourage men and women to operate as peers in the workplace. In many other societies, however, culturally dictated gender roles may require that men be in positions of power and authority over women.
- b) Cross-cultural gender issues can create a variety of workplace conflicts. Men from traditional societies may have difficulty adjusting to female co-workers or supervisors. Similarly, it may be strange for women who have never been employed outside the home to have a male, other than her husband or father, giving her instructions. Indeed, women from certain cultures are very shy or ashamed to talk to a man not from their immediate family – even if he is the boss.
- c) When dealing with male employees who resent women in positions of authority, female supervisors can avoid potential confrontations by not making the giving of instructions a matter of personal authority. Communicating “the company’s” instructions clearly, consistently and explicitly can prove to be more successful and less threatening.

## **Religion**

- a) While respect for religious practices is deeply rooted in American culture and law, frequently that respect may only extend as far as Christian beliefs and practices are concerned. Given the growing religious diversity of the American workplace, that can pose problems. Management should understand the cultural significance of an employee’s faith while employees should respect the employer’s need for productivity.
- b) Employment practices and religious beliefs can conflict in any number of ways including: the wearing of religious apparel or symbols, requests for time-off for religious holidays or holy days or accommodation for prayer during the workday itself. (Muslims, for example, must pray five times per day.) Dietary practices and religiously based bodily cleansings may also be issues.
- c) Employers should understand basic employment law principles pertaining to religion in the workplace in order to avoid discriminatory practices. In particular, employers should understand their rights and obligations with

respect to requests for religious accommodation and their affirmative duty to stop and prevent religious-based harassment.

## **Time and Punctuality**

- a) Time is a culturally determined concept. Accordingly, many cultures have a different understanding of time and being “on time” than Americans do.
- b) Cultural conflicts over time tend to show up in two different ways in the American workplace. Americans notion of time is exact and linear whereas other cultures’ concept of time is more elastic. For example, in some Latin American cultures, arranging to meet at 7:00 p.m. may mean that anytime between 7:30 and 9:00 p.m. is acceptable. Second, Americans place more emphasis on productivity at work (“time is money”) while other cultures may place more value on the social interactions that take place at work. Consequently, Americans can see culturally diverse employees as lazy and inefficient while such employees view Americans as cold and rude.

## **Confusion re: Company Policies and Procedures**

- a) America is a very legalistic society and that value is reflected in organizations employment policies and procedures. Many culturally diverse employees come from countries where the emphasis is less on legal rules than on personal relationships. As a result, these employees may not appreciate the importance that companies and H.R. personnel place on the policies contained in employee handbooks.
- b) Digesting ideas is a slower process in a second language. Employees with limited English abilities may need more than one presentation of the information or additional assistance to completely understand. It is always a good idea to:
  - \* Provide a written summary of any important information, with key points highlighted.
  - \* Tour the facilities and demonstrate equipment as well as safety procedures.
  - \* Conduct periodic safety drills, role-playing different situations to help employees gain confidence with procedures.
  - \* Use peers or more senior employees with the same cultural background as the employee to mentor them and serve as “cultural brokers.”

- \* Develop feedback mechanisms for culturally diverse employees that allow them to demonstrate their understanding of the communicated information.