

CONNECTIONS

Communicating in Culturally Diverse Settings

The Do's and Don'ts of Multicultural Communication: Part 1- The Don'ts

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When people from diverse cultural backgrounds interact within an organization, the chances of saying or doing something that can offend another person increases significantly. Fortunately, there are several steps we can take to minimize this possibility. I refer to these steps as the Do's and Don'ts of Multicultural Communication:

1. **DON'T talk to anyone in a patronizing fashion.** In other words, never “talk down” to another human being. One of the quickest ways to break down communication is to treat another person in a condescending manner. Therefore, you should consciously focus on treating everyone as an equal. Bear in mind that this is often easier said than done since we tend to categorize people and treat them based on the category they represent. For example, we often treat managers and their secretaries differently.

2. **DON'T make assumptions about people, especially those who are culturally different.** Stereotyping (making generalizations about the members of a particular group) is very common, and poses a significant barrier to effective cross-cultural communication. For that reason, it is important to be aware of the assumptions you make as you interact with culturally different people, and to make a conscious effort to minimize those assumptions.

3. **DON'T assume a culturally different person is an expert about his or her cultural group.** A common mistake that I have observed in diverse work settings is asking a culturally different person (especially if that person is a ‘minority’) to speak as a representative of his or her cultural group. This poses two problems. First, it puts the person ‘on-the-spot’, which may create a significant level of discom-

fort. Second, it inaccurately assumes that one individual can speak for an entire group of people. Always remember, no one is a spokesperson for his or her cultural group.

4. **DON'T assume a culturally different person is typical of all of the members of his or her cultural group.** A common by-product of stereotyping is the tendency to think that the behavior of one group member is typical of all group members and to only see in those group members what we expect to see. This has the potential to create many communication problems. Therefore, always strive to treat people as individuals and to get to know your colleagues on an individual basis.

5. **DON'T engage in behaviors that single out a culturally different person, especially if that person is in the minority at your workplace.** This may seem obvious, but we often do this without realizing it. For

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instance, I have observed many situations where people who are cultural minorities are asked to serve on a team or committee because of their race, gender or sexual orientation. While it may be a great honor to be asked to serve, always be aware of the difficult position you can place someone in if you single them out.

6. **DON'T ask inappropriate questions or engage in inappropriate behaviors, especially of a personal nature.** In a culturally diverse setting, it is best to stick to business at the beginning of a work relationship. This means you must take care not to ask improper questions or engage in inappropriate conversations. For example, don't ask about another person's grooming habits. Don't ask if you can touch a co-worker's hair. Don't ask others about their child rearing practices. These types of questions can create tension and make people feel uncomfortable. In addition, some people may find these types of discussions to be unsuitable for the workplace. Once you have established a strong working relationship or friendship with someone, you may be able to have discussions of this nature. But until that happens, it is

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best to avoid these types of personal conversations.

7. **DON'T try to speak or act like a culturally different person if it is not YOU.** Never try to behave the way you think someone else expects you to behave. Never act in an unnatural way because you think it is what another person wants from you. For example, don't pretend you like certain foods, music or activities just to build a relationship with a culturally different individual. Always be yourself.

NEXT ISSUE: The Do's!

TIPS Booklets

It is with great pleasure that I announce the publication of my first two TIPS booklets! Using a concise, easily scannable format, these affordable 20-page guides offer detailed tips, tools and techniques you can use to immediately improve your performance. The following booklets are currently available:

- **50 Tips for Improving Communication in Culturally Diverse Settings.**
- **50 Ways to Lose Weight Without Dieting.**

Each booklet will be available for purchase as of November 15 at a rate of only \$5 plus \$1 shipping and handling. Visit my website at www.doctorholmes.net for ordering information.

About the Author

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