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FECCA
Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Fact Sheet 6: Becoming Confident and Competent in Talking about Workplace Diversity

Developing a confident and culturally competent workforce that encourages open discussions about diversity may seem daunting.

Just remember that diversity is inherent in all organisations, given the different experiences and backgrounds of employees. So, while discussing diversity won't necessarily be a 'new' concept for your employees, they may need encouragement to know that it's acceptable to talk about it at work. Also, most employees, when encouraged correctly, will eagerly embrace the full benefits of a workplace that supports and promotes their diversity, so won't need too much convincing to make talking openly about it the norm.

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The strategies presented in this factsheet will help you to develop a confident and competent attitude towards embracing cultural diversity.

Talking about diversity

For a long time, it's been standard practice for most workplaces to encourage staff to always treat everyone 'equally' or the 'same' or risk engaging in potentially discriminatory behavior. This doesn't often happen. (Please see Factsheet 3 on discriminatory behavior). Staff often lack opportunities to openly talk about diversity in the workplace, forcing them to be cautious rather than openly embrace the diversity that distinguishes and benefits them and their colleagues.

It's extremely important to explain to your staff that it's not discriminatory to talk to people about their cultural identity and background. On the contrary, most people enjoy telling you about their ancestry and the experiences and perspectives they have as a result of their background.

Avoiding a 'colour blind' approach

When talking about diversity, it's very important not to adopt a 'colour blind' approach where we deny difference and pretend it doesn't exist. This assumes that 'if individuals and institutions don't even notice race, they can't be accused of acting in a biased or discriminatory way'. Research shows that colour blind policies don't work. Instead they help to perpetuate the status quo, without bringing positive change for an organisation and its employees. After all, we're all different and demonstrate this in many ways through gender, education, disability, marital status, parenthood status, sexuality, language and culture. Talking openly about this diversity is the first step in creating a positive and inclusive workplace that benefits your organisation and its employees.

Senior managers must lead by example, encouraging conversations about cultural diversity and showing their ease in talking about it. Managers are the ultimate mentors for staff: employees look to them and other leaders to set the example of how to act in a professional environment. Supervisors also set the standard for staff members and must always behave in a way that shows how they embrace cultural differences. For example, they could share stories about their background and identity, helping others to

harmony
in the workplace

delivering
the diversity
dividend

harmony in the workplace
Factsheet 6

open up and share their own stories. Of course, this can only be done in an environment that values and truly celebrates diversity.

Getting the conversation going

You can use the themes below as a guide to help you start discussions about cultural diversity in your workplace. They go beyond the standard and objective questions usually asked about culture, regarding language and country of birth. Keep in mind that speaking informally (without placing the spotlight on one person) is usually the most effective way to put people at ease and encourage comfortable and relaxed discussions.

Speaking informally is often the best way to have discussions about cultural diversity.

Basic themes/conversation openers:

• Food
• Languages
• Family, partners and children
• Hobbies/leisure time spent away from work
• Clothing and dress styles
• Travel.

More complex themes:

• Perceptions of individual/community
• Perceptions of time – how important/influential time is as a guide and how deadlines are perceived
• Personal space and how this is understood in an office environment
• Perceptions of public versus private (inappropriate behaviour for a public (work) space)
• Understandings regarding hierarchy and respect
• Approaches to learning – asking questions, researching, group discussions, etc.
• Sense of humour – what's funny, what's offensive
• Conversational approach – talking openly, keeping opinions private and how respect relates to this
• Career aspirations and expectations.

Celebrating Harmony Day - Everyone Belongs

Each year, on 21 March Australia's cultural diversity is celebrated, recognising both the traditional owners of this land and those who have come to Australia from the world over. Harmony Day coincides with the United Nations' *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.*

Many organisations around Australia celebrate Harmony Day by organising a morning or afternoon tea and inviting employees to share in preparing and enjoying cultural meals. This is a great way for employees to become aware of their organisation's cultural diversity and learn more about their colleagues and team members.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) formally coordinates Harmony Day celebrations each year and provides free Harmony Day promotional material to individuals and organisations who register events online.

For more details and ideas for celebrating Harmony Day in your workplace, please visit: www.harmony.gov.au.

HARMONY DAY

Developing and maintaining a confident and culturally competent workforce

Once you have a greater understanding of your employees and their cultural background, you'll have the confidence to talk openly about this diversity. It will benefit your organisation, by enabling you to take full advantage of diversity (see Factsheets 8 and 9), and your employees by removing cultural myths and stereotypes (See Factsheet 7) and encouraging a harmonious and inclusive workplace.

The following strategies will help you to build confidence around cultural diversity:

• Celebrating and encouraging cultural events such as Harmony Day (visit the DIAC website for more information). Informal interactions between staff at

these events encourages discussion about cultural diversity and people's backgrounds, making it easier for them to talk about it at work on a daily basis.

- Organising cultural competency training for staff to ensure everyone is 'on the same page' about your organisation's expectations about diversity and how staff must be committed to ensuring it is the accepted and practised norm.

- Developing staff capacity and skills in conflict management, explaining the difference between resolving and eliminating conflict, and offering strategies to avoid situations where resolution is needed.

- Having regular formal and informal staff discussions to identify and address issues before they escalate or significantly damage the employees involved and your organisation. Offering communication skills training to increase confidence in this area is also a good solution.

Language: do's and don'ts

The table on the following page will help you to use appropriate language when talking about cultural diversity.

As a general rule, workplaces should ban any reference to racial slurs or terms that have derogatory and discriminatory connotations. This sort of language is not only unacceptable, but also puts a workplace at risk of dealing with accusations and receiving penalties resulting from racial vilification.

References

[1] Mikulak, A. 2012. 'Colour Blind' Policies Could Make Diversity Harder to Achieve'. Accessed 7 June 2013. Available at: http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/color-blind-policies-could-make-diversity-harder-to-achieve.html

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Term	Explanation	Use or Avoid?
'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD)	There's been an increasing trend to use CALD as a descriptor for individuals or groups of individuals who come from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds.	This is broadly accepted as appropriate vocabulary and is used in Government policy and documents. Remember that the 'diverse' in CALD assumes a point of difference, which can be divisive. So, if it's used to describe a person, they would come from a 'CALD background'. The term could also be used to describe a workforce or organisation that's culturally and linguistically diverse.
'Migrant'/ 'Immigrant'	These terms are used to describe people who have come to Australia from English-speaking countries (e.g. England, Canada, New Zealand) and non-English-speaking countries (e.g. China, Italy, India).	Appropriate, but provided it's used in the correct context – in reference to someone who has gone through the process of migration and has immigrated to Australia from another country.
'Ethnic'	This typically refers to a person or group's 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic background', which may be misconceived as being the same as their country of origin or cultural background.	Not recommended. It's an illogical term with negative and potentially discriminatory connotations (referring to someone as an 'ethnic' is not acceptable, given its assumptions and stereotypes, and connotations between the term and other racial slurs such as 'wog', 'chink' and other discriminatory labels). It's also incorrect to use when referring to people who have immigrated to Australia, as all Australians have their own ethnicity (see Factsheet 7: Common Myths and Misperceptions About Cultural Diversity).
Country of origin identifier - 'Italian', 'Chinese', etc.	Description based on a person's perceived or actual country of origin.	Be careful when using a country of origin descriptor as it may be imprecise and not reflect how a person sees his/her ethnicity. It's more imprecise when referring to a person who is a second-generation immigrant who was born in Australia, but identifies with a particular cultural background. Its preferred use is, as demonstrated, by designating background as an adjective – e.g. "person/employee from an Italian background" or "Italian Australian".
'Multicultural'	A term describing a variety of cultures that shape a person or group (e.g. a 'multicultural organisation' that has a culturally diverse workforce).	This is far more inclusive and relevant to use when describing a group (i.e. a workplace or organisation) or a group of workers from a diverse background. The term shouldn't be used to describe a person – e.g. "he is multicultural".
'Ethnicity' or 'ancestry'	This refers to a person's cultural background, including nationality, language, religion, heritage etc.	Be careful when using these terms, as they may be imprecise and not reflect how a person sees his/her ethnicity or ancestry. They're more appropriate for self-identification purposes, provided they're clearly understood.