

ALBERTA CIVIL LIBERTIES RESEARCH CENTRE

Tips for Dealing with Cultural Differences

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The culture we grow up in determines how we express ourselves and how we relate to other people. Our culture defines who we see as "us" and who we see as "them." In our daily interactions, cultural stereotypes can create tensions that affect our ability to successfully interact. At work they can impact job satisfaction and productivity. We can all benefit when we confront our prejudices, assumptions and stereotypes, and move beyond them. Setting aside cultural biases is not easy - it takes time and determination. The following tips can help.

- **Treat all of the people you meet and work with as individuals.** Try to look beyond the cultural background and *see the person*.
- **Respect personal names.** Call people by the name they want to be called. Learn the correct way to pronounce it, the correct order to say it, and appropriate titles of respect. Do not use slang terms such as "dear," or change their names to ones that you can pronounce easily.
- **Turn fear into curiosity.** We are often taught to be suspicious of other groups. Ask yourself, "What if we could get beyond our differences? What would I learn?"
- **Avoid making generalizations** about a whole group based on one or two members. Just because one member of a group is sloppy or impolite, it does not mean all members of the group are sloppy or impolite!
- **Try to be open** to new information about a culture or group of people. We tend to distort or ignore information that does not agree with our view of the world.
- **Don't assume** that because a person is good or bad at one thing, that he/she is good or bad at other things. For example, don't assume that someone who speaks English poorly also does other things poorly. He/she may be highly educated, very skilled and speak several languages.
- **Don't play favourites or treat others unfairly.** It is normal to feel a little uncomfortable when you are dealing with someone from another culture - but do not let your discomfort cause you to treat that person differently.
- **Notice the economic and social dividing lines** in your workplace and community. If you are on the privileged side of the line, be sensitive to the needs and feelings of those who aren't.

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- **Use acceptable terms for cultural groups.** Find out which terms are acceptable to a cultural group and which are not. Speak up if others use terms that are not acceptable to you. Let them know what you would like your group to be called.
- **Avoid making judgements** based on the accent, timing or pace of someone's speech. Different ways of speaking may strike you as too haughty or subservient, or even insulting. You may even consider the accent as *exotic*. Try to view the person objectively, even if the accent seems *so* romantic!
- **Laugh with people, not at them.** Don't tell ethnic or sexual jokes *ever*. If you are offended by a joke told by someone else, tell them later privately. Or simply say "Ouch! That hurts" to let them know that your cultural toes have been stepped on.
- **Recognize the "insult game."** Using teasing insults to show affection is a game sometimes played by men, but often misunderstood by women and members of some cultural groups. If you are expected to play along, learn the rules by observing the game, then always accompany a jab with a smile! Or, better yet, refuse to go along. Remember too, that people may laugh when embarrassed, hurt or unsure of how to respond. Don't assume that they are genuinely amused by what is going on.
- **Expect to have to explain cultural unwritten rules.** People from cultures other than yours will not be able to "read between the lines." Explain cultural expectations - even if it makes you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.
- **Find out how disagreements are handled** in the other person's culture. It may be considered unacceptable to say "No" directly, or "No" may simply mean that further negotiation is expected. Avoid public displays of anger or reprimands.
- **Pay attention to gestures.** Be careful of gestures you use and how they might be interpreted. If you are puzzled by someone else's gestures, ask questions. Tell people if they use inappropriate gestures; do so in a way that does not embarrass or make them "lose face."
- **Be aware that different cultures view time differently.** If you can't adopt the other person's sense of time, negotiate something that will work for both of you.
- **Adjust your interpersonal "space" requirements,** if necessary. People in different cultures may feel very uncomfortable if you stand too close or too far away (by *their* standards). Notice how closely they stand after *they* approach *you*. Pay attention to how they react if you move closer or if you move away.

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- Be very careful about touching in *any* way. Watch what other people do, especially when they are with people of their own culture. Usually people do to others what they will accept from others - except when there is a difference in social status or authority.