

Avoiding Common Communication Errors When Interacting With Individuals Who Are Different Than You

When interacting with individuals that are different than you, it is understandable that communication errors will be made. Some errors will be relatively minor and easily overlooked by the person you are interacting with, while others may cause offence and be potentially damaging to your relationship. Although most errors are not intentional, it helps to be aware of common communication errors that people make and to avoid making them yourself. Some common communication errors people make that you should avoid are:

Asking “What are you?”

As surprising as this question may seem, it is a question frequently asked of visible minorities and Aboriginal Peoples. Asking someone *what they are* is extremely offensive. The obvious answer to the question is that he or she is a person, but that is not what is really being asked. What is really being asked is often “What is your ethnicity?” which is most often irrelevant to the situation.

Asking “Where are you from?”

Watch out for the question, “Where are you from?” Canadians seem to be obsessed about asking this seemingly harmless question. Ask yourself, “How often do I ask this question of someone who is a visible or audible minority?” Now compare the answer with “How often do I ask this question of someone who is White or Caucasian?” You may find, like many people, that you ask this question more often of people who are visible or audible minorities. Many visible and audible minorities report that they are asked frequently this question. When you ask this question, it could be interpreted to mean “Because you do not look like me or sound like me, you could not be Canadian like me, so where are you *really* from?” Although this question may only indicate curiosity, be aware of how many times you ask it and of whom, and be sensitive about the implications you might be projecting. Do not assume that visible minorities or audible minorities are not Canadian or that they were born outside of Canada. While it is true that some visible and audible minorities were not born in Canada, many were born in Canada and many have become Canadian citizens.

The term *visible minorities* refers to persons who are non-Caucasian or non-White in color, while the term *audible minorities* refers to persons who speak English with an accent or intonation that is not local or regional.

Saying “You speak English very well!”

Visible minorities often hear this comment made to them, even those that were born in Canada and whose first language is English. Commenting on someone’s ability to speak English communicates that you are making an assumption that English is their second language. While it is true that some visible minorities do speak English as a second language, as do some whites and Caucasians, many visible minorities speak English as their first, and sometimes only language, and were born in Canada.

Having the attitude that you need to speak louder to all people who look different than you.

There was a recent article in the newspaper that described a reporter's experience spending the day with a Muslim woman. Both the Muslim woman and the reporter dressed in traditional Muslim clothing. Everywhere they went in Calgary, people spoke louder and slower to them. The assumption was made by others that they did not speak English or that English was a second language. Many people wear traditional clothing of their culture; this does not mean that they were not born in Canada and that they do not speak English well. Even if the person does not speak English well, they are not hard of hearing, so don't raise your voice; rather, speak with a normal volume and speak clearly. Again, do not assume that someone who looks culturally different that you speaks English as a second language.

In addition, many people who have a visible disability report that other people will often speak louder to them. Do not make the mistake of assuming that because someone is, for example, in a wheelchair that they are also hard of hearing.

Thinking "If I shout you will understand me better"

Often when people are having difficulty communicating with someone, they tend to raise their voice and speak more slowly. If the person does not understand English, or is hard of hearing, shouting will not help them understand or hear better. Try using fewer words, using simpler words, and using gestures. If the person is hard of hearing, try lowering your voice and speaking more slowly if you tend to speak quickly.

If you are communicating with a limited or non-English speaking client/patient or family, the Calgary Health Region standard is to arrange for a Certified Health Care Interpreter (**call Interpretation & Translation Services at 403-944-0202**) to ensure informed consent and informed treatment.

Or you can contact the Aboriginal Hospital Liaison for assistance in communicating with Aboriginal Peoples.

If you are speaking with a person who communicates in American Sign Language, you are required by law to arrange for a Sign Language Interpreter. The Deaf person may present a Calgary Health Region card which reads: "I communicate in American Sign Language. Please arrange for an interpreter." The contact information is on the back of the card. If the Deaf person does not have a card, arrangements can be made 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling: *Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services* at 403-284-6203 between 8:30 and 4:30 Monday through Friday, or after hours and week-ends at 403-229-6939

Interpreter costs are covered by Interpretation & Translation Services; there is no cost for the interpreter for either the client or the requesting unit.

Ignoring the person with a disability and talking through their attendant.

Because a person is accompanied by an attendant or another person does not mean that they cannot speak for themselves. Your questions or comments should always be directed towards the person with a disability. If they are accompanied by an attendant, they are with them to assist with their physical needs and will not necessarily to speak on their behalf.

Paying attention to service or working animals.

Working animals provide services to a person with a disability including those who use wheelchairs, who are blind or Deaf, and those who have seizures. If you encounter a working or service animal,

respect the fact that this animal is necessary to the independence of the person and should not be distracted. Do not ignore the person with a disability and talk to or pat the animal.

Touching or removing a patient's/client's cultural or religious objects.

Cultural and religious objects are viewed as part of the person's whole being. They should never be touched or removed from the person without first asking permission.

Leaning on a person's wheelchair.

View a wheelchair as an extension of the body of the person who uses it. Also, be aware of a person's personal space. Touching or leaning on someone's wheelchair is equivalent to touching their leg or otherwise invading their personal space.

Avoiding eye contact when talking with a person with a disability.

People without a disability often avoid looking at a person with a disability when they are speaking to them. Again, this reaction often occurs because of the uncertainty, fear and discomfort people without a disability may feel when they encounter a person with a disability. People with a disability wish to be treated in a fair and equitable way. By not making eye contact with a person with a disability, you are communicating that you do not value them as an equal.

Focusing on the interpreter, if one is present.

When communicating with a person who is Deaf or a person who is limited or non-English speaking through a sign language or a language interpreter, always look at the person with whom you are communicating. The interpreter is there only to facilitate the interaction. You are not communicating with the interpreter directly; therefore, look at the person you are speaking to.

Finishing a person's sentence for them.

A person with a speech disability does not necessarily have an intellectual disability or a hearing disability. It is disrespectful to finish any person's sentence, including a person with a speech disability. Always allow a person with a speech impairment to finish their own sentences. You can help facilitate the communication with a person with a speech impairment by considering asking questions that allow for a short answer or a nod of the head.

Impairing the line of vision when communicating with someone who is a lip reader.

Keep your hands away from your mouth while talking with someone who is lip reading. Also, do not eat or chew gum. Speak clearly, but do not exaggerate lip movements or shout. If the person who is a lip reader also communicates in American Sign Language, it may be helpful to arrange for an interpreter, particularly for meetings that involve many people.

Helping a person with a disability without being asked.

People often under react or overreact when they encounter a person with a disability. These reactions often are a result of the uncertainty, fear, and discomfort that people without a disability feel when they encounter someone with a disability. People without a disability under react by ignoring the person or pretending they do not exist. They overreact by trying to help the person when they do not want or need help. Always ask first before you help a person with a disability. If they respond that they do need help, ask for specific instructions on how you can be most helpful. For example, if the person

has a visual impairment, don't grab his or her arm; it is usually easier for him or her to hold onto your arm.

Towering above a person using a wheelchair when you are having a conversation with them.

If you are having an extended conversation with a person who uses a wheelchair, get a chair and sit at eye level with the person. Do not squat beside the wheelchair and hold or hang on to it for balance. If you remain standing, this can nonverbally communicate an imbalance of power between you and the person who uses a wheelchair.

Setting the pace when walking with a person with a disability.

When walking with a person with a disability, or a person who uses a mobility device such as a wheelchair, walker or cane, allow the person to set the pace. Adjust your pace to their pace and do not rush ahead or lag behind; simply walk with the person at their own pace.